

Theology 'Under the Lash': Theology as Idolatry Critique in the Work of Nicholas Lash¹

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It has, in these postmodern times, become a little easier to win a hearing for the suggestion that *Ideologiekritik* is always, in the last analysis, critique of idolatry.²

[T]he *critical* dimension of the theological task is to be sought in the direction of the critique of idolatry – the stripping away of the veils of self-assurance by which we seek to protect our faces from exposure to the mystery of God.³

I. Introduction

For Nicholas Lash, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity in Cambridge from 1978-1999, theology is best understood as the critical theory of faith; as a process of 'critical reflection on Christian practice.'⁴ This essay explores the way in which Lash has increasingly treated of this under the category of idolatry. There are three broad movements to the discussion. The first explores Lash's understanding of the proper role of criticism in theology. The second focuses in on the suggestion that his recurrent references to idolatry can be taken as a hermeneutical key to understanding the core concerns in his writings. The third then considers his understanding of the specific education

¹ This essay is taken from the forthcoming *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, Stephen C. Barton, (London: Continuum, 2007). Reproduced by kind permission of Continuum International Publishing Group.

² Lash, 'Hollow Centres and Holy Places', *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 183–98 (p. 194), henceforth *BAEOR*.

³ 'Criticism or Construction? The Task of the Theologian', *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, (London: SCM, 1986), pp. 3–17 (p. 9), henceforth *TOWE*.

⁴ *A Matter of Hope: A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx*, (London: DLT, 1981), p. 208, henceforth *MOH*; also p. 133; 'Doing Theology on Dover Beach', *Theology on Dover Beach*, (London: DLT, 1979), pp. 3–23 (p. 14), henceforth *TODB*; 'Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy', *TOWE*, pp. 95–119 (pp. 101, 103); 'Theory, Theology and Ideology', *ibid.*, pp. 120–138 (p. 137). Lest the footnote references to Lash's writings appear unnecessarily extensive for the purposes of this essay, it is perhaps worth stating that my intention is to trace the relevant key movements of his thought in as systematic and comprehensive a way as possible in a manner previously not done and, by so doing, to provide a basis for any who might wish to take this further.

in right desiring and right worship that is to be found in the school of Christian discipleship. The essay draws to a close by reflecting on the specifically ecclesiological implications of this and the ways in which Lash's concerns might appropriately be taken forwards.

II. The Proper Role of Criticism in Theology

As those forced 'to fight *under the lash*' is how Newman was wont to describe the impossible situation of seeking to argue intelligently with liberals whilst standing under the constant, incomprehending scrutiny of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith ("*Propaganda*"), under whose authority the Roman Catholic community in the "mission territory" of Britain then came.⁵ Given such a background of association, this might seem a strange phrase with which to open a discussion of the work of Nicholas Lash. For despite his reputation for living up to his name, with a singular, nose-twitching capacity for incisive, potentially devastating critique borne of meticulous attention to detail, Lash like Newman instinctively resists the controlling strictures of overweening forms of ecclesial authoritarianism, seeking always instead to allow for necessary 'elbow room' in theology.⁶ But – and here again like Newman – the space that Lash has sought to open, a space of mature freedom rather than indulgent fantasy or adolescent rebellion, is by no means devoid of all constraint and responsibility.⁷ Whilst authoritarian whips might be out, there is for Lash a yoke of service under which theology is properly pursued as the always needing to be renewed task of attending to what can be discerned of God's truth in the Church for the good of the world and of subjecting all claims to this effect to rigorous scrutiny.

⁵ See Newman, 'Letter to Emily Bowles', May 19, 1863, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman, Volume XX*, Charles Stephen Dessain (ed.), (London: Thomas Nelson, 1970), pp. 445–8 (p. 447); also 'Letter to Henry Wilberforce', *Letters and Diaries, Volume XXIV*, Charles Stephen Dessain & Thomas Gornall, S.J. (eds.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 120–1 (p. 120). I am grateful to Rev Dr Michael Sharratt of Ushaw College, Durham for drawing my attention to these references. The *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* was renamed in 1967 as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

⁶ For just a few examples of Lash's keen nose ('my suspicious nose') for detail in criticism of others, see *MOH*, pp. 4 (n.5), 6–7; also 'Observation, Revelation, and the Posterity of Noah', *BAEOR*, pp. 75–92 (p. 92). This trait can be clearer still in face-to-face exchange, a product, perhaps, of the particular academic culture to which he is habituated. A notable example of this was the 'D Society' – the Cambridge research seminar in philosophical theology chaired by the Norris-Hulse Professor – which had all the quaint gentility of a tea-party with a pack of velociraptors. On 'elbow room' in theology, see Newman, 'Letter to Emily Bowles', p. 447 and 'Letter to W. J. O'Neill Daunt, June 17, 1863, *Letters and Diaries, Volume XX*, pp. 475–6 (p. 476).

⁷ On freedom as the responsible negotiation of finitude, constraint and mutual accountability, see 'Incarnation and Determinate Freedom', *BAEOR*, pp. 237–51; also 'What Authority Has Our Past?', *TOWE*, pp. 47–61 (pp. 58–61).

Lash's way of exploring this balance of freedom, responsibility and accountability has frequently taken the form of commentary on Newman's reflections on the threefold office of the Church – priestly, kingly and prophetic – as delineated in the latter's 1877 preface to the third edition of *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*. Where the priestly represents the devotional heart and soul of Church life, the kingly represents its organisational reality and system of governance – its body politic as it were – and the prophetic its critical reason, or theological function.⁸ Each requires to be held in check by the other two. Left alone, devotion tends towards superstition, organisational acumen to authoritarianism and theology to rationalism.⁹ As such, theology is properly to be seen as being both doubly accountable to the lived faith of the Church and its powers of governance and, in turn, as performing the necessary role of scrutinising the practice of faith and the institutional reality of the Church for signs of falsity.¹⁰

Further, whilst the three offices might have particular affinities respectively with the roles of priests, bishops and theologians, they are not to be viewed as mutually exclusive descriptions of particular, distinct groups within the Church so much as three all-pervasive and necessarily intertwined aspects of Christian response to the reality of God.¹¹ Those immersed in the devotional life of the Church must also always have an eye and ear to matters of oversight and truth and will, on occasion at least, have to speak in kingly and prophetic voice alongside the priestly. Likewise, the ruler, the overseer, will appropriately share the concerns and something of the voice of the priest and the prophet, whilst the theologian, in turn, rightly has to have something of the sensitivities of the priest and the overseer about him/her.¹²

⁸ 'Christianity is at once a philosophy, a political power, and a religious rite... As religion, its special centre of action is pastor and flock; as a philosophy, the [theological] Schools; as a rule, the Papacy and its curia.' Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, 3rd edn., (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1877), p. xl, cited by Lash in *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, (London: SCM, 1988), p. 138, henceforth *EIO*; also pp. 136–40; 'Life, Language and Organization: Aspects of the Theological Ministry', *TODB*, pp. 89–108.

⁹ See *The Via Media*, xli, in *EIO*, p. 138; also pp. 137–9; 'Life, Language and Organization', pp. 89, 91, 99, 101–3, 107; *MOH*, p. 151.

¹⁰ See 'Except theology springs from and reflects, the theologian's 'endurance', 'passion', 'devotion'; except it be the critical, theoretical reflection of the 'logic of the heart', it is corrupted by its own misconceived autonomy: it becomes the language of Balaam.' 'Life, Language and Organization', p. 98; compare '...there are no expressions of Christian faith – linguistic, pictorial, dramatic or institutional – which can claim immunity from theological criticism.' *MOH*, p. 208; also 'Life, Language and Organization', pp. 95, 103.

¹¹ See *EIO*, p. 137 citing and referring to Newman, 'The Three Offices of Christ', *Sermons Bearing on Subjects of the Day*, (London: Rivingtons, 1869), pp. 52–62 (pp. 54–6).

¹² See 'Life, Language and Organization', pp. 103, 104.

In the latter regard, for example, it is notable that in Lash's own writings matters pertaining to institutional realities and politics are never far from view.¹³ Again, as the explicit integration of the priestly and prophetic voices in certain of his more recent writings testifies – pre-eminently so in his reading of the Apostles' Creed, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, one of the finest recent short performances of Christian theology in the round – here is someone for whom the task of theology represents a specific living out of the demands of Christian vocation.¹⁴ As he comments, reflecting on Rahner, 'even the most rigorous and technical academic theology must itself exhibit something of the message, the announcement, *God's* announcement, to which it points and of which it seeks some understanding.'¹⁵ Or, less prosaically, '...the theologian, as music critic of the song of songs, must also – in the very texture of her critical activity – make some contribution to its singing.'¹⁶ For all this interdependence of voice and formal subject matter, however, it remains the case that for Lash as for Newman when the theologian is speaking *qua* theologian, s/he does so in a crucial sense over and against the priestly and kingly voices respectively.¹⁷

Situated within this balance of concerns, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that Lash tends to accord a certain priority of attention to the critical aspect of the theological task over the constructive whilst nevertheless acknowledging that in practical terms the latter always precedes the

¹³ For example, 'The doctrine of redemption does not afford the Christian any licence to substitute a *theory* of reconciliation... for its practice... [It] articulates the form of Christian hope, but that hope has to be *enacted* – in individual and social existence, in marriage, technology, art and politics...' *MOH*, p. 193; also pp. 36–7, 44, 75, 132, 157, 183, 205; 'Doing Theology on Dover Beach', *TODB*, p. 18; 'The Church and Christ's Freedom', *ibid.*, pp. 137–49 (pp. 137, 141, 144); 'Continuity and Discontinuity in the Christian Understanding of God', *ibid.*, pp. 27–44 (p. 39); 'Performing the Scriptures', *TOWE*, pp. 37–46 (p. 42); 'The Church's Responsibility for the Future of Humanity', *ibid.*, pp. 186–201; *EIO*, pp. 85–90; *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed*, (London: SCM, 1992), pp. 21, 25, 75, 88–9, henceforth *BTWOG*; 'Creation, Courtesy and Contemplation', *BAEOR*, pp. 164–82 (p. 178); 'Hoping Against Hope, or Abraham's Dilemma', *ibid.*, pp. 199–218 (p. 208); 'Eagles and Sheep: Christianity and the Public Order Beyond Modernity', *ibid.*, pp. 219–36; 'Beyond the End of History?', *ibid.*, pp. 252–264; *Holiness, Speech and Silence: Reflections on the Question of God*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 25–6, 42–4, 52, 56, 65–6, 69, henceforth *HSS*.

¹⁴ Also *HSS*. This dual voice is also clearly evident in some of his earlier works, e.g. *His Presence in the World*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), but less so in the writings of the intervening period driven by the demands of world-class excellence in academic theology and, perhaps, the self-understanding of one who had moved out of ordained priestly ministry and into the role of lay professional theologian.

¹⁵ 'Contemplation, Metaphor and Real Knowledge', *BAEOR*, pp. 112–131 (p. 121), referring to Rahner, 'Possible Courses for the Theology of the Future', *Theological Investigations, Vol. XIII*, trans. by David Bourke, (London: DLT, 1975), pp. 32–60 (pp. 40–2).

¹⁶ 'Contemplation, Metaphor and Real Knowledge', p. 122.

¹⁷ See 'Life, Language and Organization', pp. 106–7.

former. For example, in the Preface to *Theology on Dover Beach*, he voices the integrating conviction ‘that, far from surrendering its critical integrity and (relative) autonomy, Christian theological reflection only attains its own proper rigour and significance if it is continually borne in mind that such reflection is dependent upon, secondary to, Christian faith and practice.’¹⁸ This proper ‘primacy of the practical’ in matters of faith can, however, never dispense from the need for the ‘*ascesis* of theological enquiry.’¹⁹ The sense is that as the ‘reflexive, theoretical, second-order’ quest for understanding stimulated by the language and practice of faith,²⁰ theological analysis presupposes previous constructive articulations of faith down which it abseils, testing their securities. Whilst this may, in turn, open space for subsequent constructive re-articulations, the further sense is that such creative performances lie somewhere between the priestly and the prophetic or, perhaps better, are sung in dual voice – as has just been suggested in relation to Lash’s own *Believing Three Ways in One God* – rather than being works of critical academic theology *per se*.²¹ As he states in particularly uncompromising terms at one point: ‘It is not the theologian’s business to tell other people what, or how, to believe. His responsibilities are critical, interpretative or clarificatory rather than declaratory.’²²

With this scrutinising, ‘interrogative’ mode of theological analysis to the fore, Lash’s characteristic way of pursuing theology systematically has never aimed at the articulation of a grand system of thought, or a ready apologetic defence of Christian faith. As he states, ‘...the concept of ‘system’, with its seductive, promethean overtones of panoramic organisation, allows the theologian too easily to lose sight of the fact that his work, like that of the philosopher, is irreducibly interrogative in character.’²³ Indeed, to seek for such

¹⁸ ‘Preface’, *TODB*, p. ix; also ‘Doing Theology on Dover Beach’, pp. 21–2; ‘Continuity and Discontinuity’, p. 33; ‘Life, Language and Organization’, pp. 93, 96, 98; *MOH*, p. 208; ‘The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’, *BAEOR*, pp. 3–25 (pp. 5–6). For Lash’s programmatic statement of what is envisaged more generally in championing ‘the enterprise of critical theology’, see ‘Doing Theology on Dover Beach’, pp. 3–23; also ‘Criticism or Construction? The Task of the Theologian’, *TOWE*, pp. 3–17, particularly p. 15.

¹⁹ ‘Doing Theology on Dover Beach’, p. 15; also ‘Hoping Against Hope, or Abraham’s Dilemma’, *BAEOR*, p. 208.

²⁰ ‘Up and Down in Christology’, in *New Studies in Theology I*, S. W. Sykes & D. Holmes (eds.), (London: Duckworth, 1980), pp. 31–46 (p. 34).

²¹ For Lash’s use of ‘performance’, specifically in relation to the continually renewed task of interpreting the scriptures and seeking to live within their narrational framework, see ‘Performing the Scriptures’, *TOWE*, pp. 37–46; *MOH*, p. 1.

²² *MOH*, p. 5.

²³ ‘Doing Theology on Dover Beach’, p. 12; also p. 20; *MOH*, pp. 5, 6, 30, 149; ‘Introduction’, *TOWE*, pp. ix–xii (pp. ix–x); *EIO*, p. 219. This is a strategy concerning which Lash acknowledges having learned a great deal from his predecessor Donald M. MacKinnon, see *MOH*, p. xiii; ‘Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy’, *TOWE*,

a system in his writings and then to find him wanting for failing to deliver would be significantly to misunderstand his purposes.²⁴ It is not that there are no recurrent, integrating themes in his work. Four candidates from amongst others would be: (i) an emphasis upon the lived dimension of Christian truth as a 'way of discipleship';²⁵ (ii) an emphasis upon the ordinariness and ubiquity of experience of God;²⁶ (iii) an understanding of the Church as sacramental of the deep story of the world;²⁷ and (iv) an understanding of the character of Christian hope as transcending either glib optimism or closed pessimism.²⁸ Nor is it that Lash does not seek to think such recurrent themes through with a keen eye both to their internal coherence and their extensive coherence with whatever other relevant areas of human understanding apply. Rather, it is that like his core influences, Newman, Rahner and MacKinnon, Lash's preferred mode of theologizing is the essay in which he typically pursues the rigorous interrogation of particular issues and the proffering of specific proposals, always open to their own subsequent need of testing and potential revision. As he puts it in *A Matter of Hope*, 'Seriously to *enquire* is always, as any historian or scientist knows, to enquire about something *particular*.'²⁹ Again, words that he used in

pp. 95–119. For further on MacKinnon's characteristic mode of theologising, see Paul D. Murray, *Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 163–89.

²⁴ Compare Philip Kenneson, 'Nicholas Lash on Doctrinal Development and Ecclesial Authority', *Modern Theology*, 5 (1989), 271–300; Lucas Lamadrid, 'Is There a System in the Theology of Nicholas Lash?', *Heythrop Journal*, 33 (1992), 399–414; Gale Z. Heide, 'The Nascent Noeticism of Narrative Theology: An Examination of the Relationship Between Narrative and Metaphysics in Nicholas Lash', *Modern Theology*, 12 (1996), 459–81, particularly pp. 460–3; Aidan Nichols, 'Catholic Theology in Britain: The Scene Since Vatican II', *New Blackfriars*, 80 (1999), 451–71 (p. 460).

²⁵ See *MOH*, pp. 30, 31, 75, 84–7, 193, 285–6; *Newman on Development: The Search for an Explanation in History*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), pp. 42, 142–5; 'Life, Language and Organization', pp. 98, 100, 102–3, 107; *HSS*, p. 21.

²⁶ See *EIO*, *passim*; also 'These Things Were Here and but the Beholder Wanting', *TODB*, pp. 150–63; 'Eternal Life: Life 'After' Death?', *ibid.*, pp. 164–82 (p. 180) and 'Human Experience and the Knowledge of God', *TOWE*, pp. 141–57.

²⁷ See *MOH*, pp. 75, 237, 252; 'Introduction', *TOWE*, p. xi; 'Theologies at the Service of a Common Tradition', *ibid.*, pp. 18–33 (pp. 23–6); *HSS*, p.41, all explicitly referring to Vatican II's description of the Church as the 'sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind', *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, n.1; also 'The Church and Christ's Freedom', *TODB*, p. 138; 'How Do We Know Where We Are?', *TOWE*, pp. 62–74 (pp. 68–9); 'The Church's Responsibility for the Future of Humanity', p. 200; *HSS*, pp. 27–8.

²⁸ See *MOH* pp. 250–80; 'The Church's Responsibility for the Future of Humanity', *TOWE*, pp. 186–201; 'All Shall Be Well: Christian and Marxist Hope', *ibid.*, pp. 202–215; 'Hoping Against Hope, or Abraham's Dilemma', *BAEOR*, pp. 199–218; 'Eagles and Sheep: Christianity and the Public Order Beyond Modernity', *ibid.*, pp. 219–36; 'Beyond the End of History?', *ibid.*, pp. 252–264; also *EIO*, pp. 48, 149, 241.

²⁹ *MOH*, p. 108; also 'Theology on Dover Beach', p. 20; 'Reflections 'On Being a Christian'', *TODB*, pp. 122–33 (pp. 126, 133).

reference both to Newman and, later Marx, apply equally well in his own regard:

The range of topics which engaged his attention, the fact that he nearly always approached them from the standpoint of the controversialist, writing to meet a specific need, his preference for detailed concrete description and his corresponding mistrust of sheerly theoretical analysis; these and other factors combine to make it more or less inevitable that any attempt at such a synthesis will be at best a pale, “notional” shadow, and at worst a serious distortion of the original.³⁰

What we are presented with, then, in Lash’s writings is not a system built to last, an intended *telos* of theological construction around which we are to wander in admiration, but a way of pursuing theology as service of the Church’s discerning of and living within the truth of God in Christ and the Spirit; a discerning of and living within a truth, moreover, that always goes before us and which necessarily permanently eludes our exhaustive understanding.³¹ As he comments in relation to Marx, ‘Knowledge of the truth, on a dialectical account of the relation between practice and theory, experience and reflection, is never a *possession*, but is always at once a task and a responsibility.’³² What Lash models for us, as such, is theology as a way of conversion; theology as ‘a programme of discovery’; theology as a ‘quest for truth through transformative activity and critical reflection’ rather than ‘the exposition and defence of an already given and constituted body of knowledge.’³³ Referring in this regard to the corrupting influence of a sense of ‘misconceived autonomy’, he warns of theology’s continual exposure ‘to the dangerous illusion... that it *possesses* its truth’ in such a fashion as ‘tends inexorably to absolutize the particular linguistic, ritual and institutional forms in which truth has found expression in the past.’³⁴ Significant here, as he acknowledges, is the fact that Christian belief in God’s irrevocable revelation in Christ can itself too easily be taken as supporting this assumption.³⁵ For Lash this points to the need to distinguish between *givenness* and *possession*:

³⁰ ‘Second Thoughts on Walgrave’s “Newman”’, *Downside Review*, 87 (1969), p. 340; *MOH*, pp. 93–4.

³¹ On the need for testing, provisionality and revision in Christian theology, see *MOH*, pp. 68–9; ‘What Authority Has Our Past?’, *TOWE*, pp. 47–61 (p. 52); *EIO*, pp. 164, 291; ‘Creation, Courtesy and Contemplation’, *BAEOR*, pp. 180–1; ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, *ibid.*, pp. 49–72 (p. 49); ‘Contemplation, Metaphor and Real Knowledge’, *ibid.*, pp. 112–131 (pp. 113–5, 127, 131); *HSS*, pp. 8–9, 17, 31, 51.

³² *MOH*, p. 107; also pp. 110, 150.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 106; also ‘...an essential precondition of responsible, faithful speech about God, witness to God, is a continual process of individual and corporate conversion, or *metanoia*.’ ‘Continuity and Discontinuity’, *TODB*, p. 38.

³⁴ *MOH*, pp. 5 & 150.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

Knowledge of God, like knowledge of other persons, is indeed donated rather than invented, received rather than constructed. In human relationships, to transmute donation into possession is to exploit the other person, to deny his humanity, his transcendence, by treating him as a commodity at our disposal. In the relation of faith, to transmute donation into possession is to deny the divinity, the transcendence, of God by treating his truth as a commodity at our disposal.³⁶

Indeed, guarding against the illusion of the possession of truth could stand as a useful summary statement of Lash's critical intentions in theology; intentions he has so frequently pursued under the category of idolatry criticism that it can usefully be treated as a hermeneutical key to understanding the various concerns that drive his work more generally.³⁷ This is not to claim that we have here the hidden structuring principle of Lash's otherwise apparently disparate writings. Nor is it to elevate idolatry over the other core themes that have also been noted as recurring there. It is simply to claim that attending to this particular, increasingly prominent theme in his thought offers fruitful perspective on his particular understanding of the task of theology more generally.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 149–50; also 'Theology on Dover Beach', p. 18; 'Continuity and Discontinuity', *TODB*, p. 44; 'Criticism or Construction?', *TOWE*, pp. 10–11. As is explored in greater detail a little later, Lash handles the tension between the givenness and elusiveness of God that lies at the heart of Christian life through a creative reading of the Trinitarian dynamics of God's being and Christian faith. For related developments, see Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', *On Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 131–47; Murray, *Reason, Truth and Theology*, pp. 131–61.

³⁷ In *Newman on Development* (1975), 'idolatry' does not appear, although there is one use of 'idolatrous' (p. 8) in citation of Newman. In *TODB* (1979) 'idolatrous' appears once (p. 18) and 'idolatry' twice (pp. 18, 159). In *MOH* (1981) 'idolatry' appears six times in 312 pages (pp. 67, 119, 158, 167 twice, 168) and 'idolatrous' three times. There are also three occasions where the notion of idolatry is under discussion without the word being used (pp. 136, 150, 183). In *TOWE* (1986) 'idolatry' appears eleven times (pp. 9, 11, 16, 26, 134, 135, 154, 156, 162 twice, 163), 'idolatrous' seven times (pp. 11, 26, 116, 189 twice, 190, 191) and 'idolatrously', 'idolater' and 'idolized' once apiece (pp. 195, 10, 201 respectively). In *EIO* (1988) 'idolatry' appears sixteen times (pp. 49, 83, 104, 160, 208, 210, 258 twice, 261, 265, 267, 268, 269, 271, 290 twice), 'idolatrous' twice (pp. 83, 210) and 'nonidolatrous' and 'idol' once apiece (pp. 226, 203). There are again many other occasions where the notion of idolatry is under discussion (e.g., pp. 167, 169). In *BTWOG* (1992), 'idolatry' appears ten times in 136 pages (pp. 21 twice, 93, 94 three times, 100, 101 twice, 108), 'idolatrous' twice (pp. 21, 101) and 'idolatrics' and 'idols' once apiece (pp. 21, 23). In *BAEOR* (1996) 'idolatry' appears thirty five times (pp. x, 8, 14, 19, 21 twice, 22, 27, 50 twice, 51, 57, 60 twice, 61, 63 twice, 64, 65, 70, 88, 100, 134 twice, 173, 178, 194, 196 twice, 245 three times, 246 twice, 253), 'negative idolatry' once (p. 187), 'idolatrous' three times (pp. 21, 50, 64), 'idol' three times (pp. 63 twice, 64), 'idols' once (p. 59), 'iconolatrous' and 'iconolatry', drawing upon the work of Raimundo Panikkar, once and four times respectively (p. 61 four times). In addition are the places where idolatry is under discussion but without explicit reference (e.g., pp. 244, 249).

III. Idolatry in View

Of the many references to idolatry and cognate terms in Lash's writings, few are accounted for by direct allusions to the twofold scriptural prohibition of images of God and worship of other gods and few also by citation of others' writings.³⁸ What this suggests is that whilst the category of idolatry and the concerns it expresses are deeply rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, its frequent use by Lash is not forced on him through its currency elsewhere. Rather, it is a category that in an important sense he chooses for himself and makes his own, regarding it, as its increasing prevalence throughout his writings suggests, as particularly well-suited to articulating the character of the human condition before God, the way of its healing in the Christian narrative and the role of theology in tending to this.

Here, then, we have Lash giving voice in his own voice to the ways of worship, practice and understanding in which he is formed and out of which he teaches. In this regard his thinking can be organised around four key points: that idolatry essentially consists in the mistaking of creaturely for divine reality; that such mistaking is less a matter of explicit conceptual objectification and more of where the heart is set; that idolatry lives forgetful that God is no thing at all, no more than 'religion' pertains to any particular area of experience and practice; that there are significant resources intrinsic to the Christian tradition for supporting the long march from the captivating security of idolatry to the intensely challenging freedom of the children of God – indeed, that the Christian tradition is a school in which all are set to the slow learning of the ways of God in Christ and the Spirit (see n.52 here). Each will be taken in turn.

III.1 Idolatry's Mistake

Lying behind Lash's pervasive appeal to idolatry to refer to situations far beyond the classic instances of graven images and explicit worship of competing deities is the recognition that idolatry essentially consists in the mistaking of some – *any* – particular aspect of reality as of a level of significance only properly accorded to the absolute reality of God. As he states in *Easter in Ordinary*, 'Idolatry takes many different forms, but what is common to them all is setting

³⁸ For direct scriptural reference, see *MOH*, p. 119; 'Theory, Theology and Ideology', *TOWE*, p. 135; *BTWOG*, p. 100. For citation of others, see *Newman on Development*, p. 8; *MOH*, p. 67, quoting Karl Popper in *The Open Society* (p. 271); also 'Beyond the End of History?', *BAEOR*, p. 253; 'Reality, Wisdom and Delight', *ibid.*, pp. 60–1, quoting Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man: Icon-Person-Mystery* (pp. 15–16).

our hearts on something less than God.’³⁹ It is ‘...the dedication of our energies, and the setting of our hearts on some particular object, event, individual, tradition, fact, or idea in the world.’⁴⁰ As such:

Idolatry is a matter of getting the reference wrong: of taking that to be God which is not God, of mistaking some fact or thing or nation or person or dream or possession or ideal for our heart’s need and the mystery ‘that moves the sun and other stars’.⁴¹

Not only is this to invest in finite creaturely reality a level of worth and expectation it cannot possibly fulfil, it correlatively constrains and diminishes vision of the true extent of reality before God.⁴² Indeed, the idolatrous instinct is to be viewed as being driven in no small part by an inability to stand exposed before the limitless, uncontrollable mystery of God, seeking instead to tame and to domesticate, to draw premature closure by making absolute claims for the inevitably partial, inadequate character of our knowing.⁴³ It is a seeking to fit and harness God to our purposes rather than disposing ourselves for the tentative discerning and service of God’s.⁴⁴

In turn, far from necessarily serving as antidote to such idolatrous reduction and manipulation, the Church’s very sacramental status renders the Church liable to its own particular version of this tendency in as much as it is always in danger of forgetting that it is the mediating form of the reality disclosed rather than the unqualified reality itself. It is, Lash maintains, ‘as true for religious as for other social institutions that the discourse in which we express or articulate our situation can also serve to disguise, from ourselves and from others, the reality of that situation.’⁴⁵ At one point even, ‘the mistaken identification of the image for the reality, the sign for the signified, the Church for the Kingdom, is the fundamental form of idolatry.’⁴⁶ The real irony here is that such mistaken identification and idolatrous

³⁹ *EIO*, p. 258.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁴¹ ‘When Did the Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?’, *BAEOR*, pp. 132–149 (p. 134); also ‘The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion?’’, p. 21; ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, pp. 60–1; ‘Observation, Revelation, and the Posterity of Noah’, *BAEOR*, p. 89; ‘Creation, Courtesy and Contemplation’, *ibid.*, p. 173; ‘Incarnation and Determinate Freedom’, *ibid.*, p. 245; *BTWOG*, pp. 21, 100; ‘The Church’s Responsibility for the Future of Humanity’, *TOWE*, p. 191.

⁴² *EIO*, pp. 159–60; also p. 203.

⁴³ See ‘Criticism or Construction?’, *TOWE*, pp. 9, 10–11; ‘Theologies at the Service of a Common Tradition’, *ibid.*, p. 26; ‘Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy’, *ibid.*, p. 116; ‘The Church’s Responsibility for the Future of Humanity’, *ibid.*, p. 195; also ‘Doing Theology on Dover Beach’, p. 18; ‘Continuity and Discontinuity’, *TODD*, p. 39; ‘Understanding the Stranger’, *ibid.*, pp. 60–76.

⁴⁴ ‘Criticism or Construction?’, *TOWE*, p. 16; ‘The Church’s Responsibility for the Future of Humanity’, *ibid.*, pp. 189–90.

⁴⁵ *MOH*, p. 132.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

absolutizing of ‘particular linguistic, ritual and institutional forms’ is made more not less likely precisely by the fact that Christianity considers itself to be engaged in the discerning of truth: ‘Convinced that the tale we tell is truly told, Christians tend to assume that the way they tell it is the way it has ever been and is ever to be told.’⁴⁷ For all such reasons – as is explored more fully a little later – Christian discourse must be ‘permanently iconoclastic’, ‘suspicious of its own anthropomorphism’.⁴⁸

III.2 *Misplaced Devotion*

For all this talk of idolatry as making of God something less than God, of absolutizing the part to the deeper occlusion of the absolute, for Lash idolatry is very definitely not a primarily conceptual, noetic affair, nor even an explicitly ‘religious’ affair, in conventional terms at least. Rather, it is a question of misplaced devotion at the level of the core values, commitments and priorities that shape our lives. Behind this lies a retrieval of the language of ‘God/god’ and ‘divinity’ not as names referring to a particular ‘divine’ thing but as descriptive terms referring to whatever it is in practice that people do in fact worship as of paramount significance in their lives. As we find in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, ‘To ask an individual, or a group, what attributes they take to be divine is to ask them what they take to be of ultimate reality and significance. It is to ask them where they ultimately put their trust; on what their hearts and hopes are set.’⁴⁹ Likewise, there is here also a retrieval of worship not simply as an explicit and conscious ‘religious’ activity but as the more pervasive and almost always more determinative practices of service, commitment and aspiration that really constitute the fabric of our lives.

In the process of articulating this understanding, Lash draws upon sources as varied as von Hügel’s view of adoration as a natural human activity to which we are all spontaneously drawn⁵⁰ and Durkheim’s view of religious ritual as the ‘totality of [social] practices’ that express the various deep commitments operative in a society. As Lash glosses in the latter regard, ‘The list of religious rituals might, therefore, include: beliefs and practices protective of ‘the market’, or of national identity, or of the superiority of male gender. . . or of instincts, prejudices and convictions lying at the very heart of who and

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 150; also p. 59; *Newman on Development*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ *MOH*, pp. 132 & 158

⁴⁹ ‘‘Son of God’’: Reflections on a Metaphor’, *TOWE*, pp. 158–66 (p. 163); also *MOH*, p. 136; ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, *BAEOR*, pp. 50–1; *HSS*, pp. 2, 10, 24, 51.

⁵⁰ *EIO*, pp. 166–72 (p. 169).

how we take ourselves and other things to be.’⁵¹ In short, ‘all human beings have their hearts set somewhere – if only on themselves.’⁵² We are, as he puts it, ‘spontaneously idolatrous.’ Moreover, given that ‘For most of us, there is probably no single creature that is the object of our faith. Most of us... are polytheists.’⁵³ This is the pervasive character of the human condition and given the significant difference that frequently exists between ‘self-description and actuality’ it follows that ‘none of us is so self-transparent as [ever] to know quite where, in fact, our hearts are set.’⁵⁴

III.3 God and Religion Misconstrued

Now, if idolatry consists in the mistaking of particular aspects of finite creaturely reality for the absolute reality of God, this is made possible, in theological terms, by the forgetting or misunderstanding that God is not any kind of *thing* or *object* at all alongside other particular things, not even a particularly unusual kind of thing in a separate realm from other things.⁵⁵ As he states, ‘All attempts thus to construe the difference between God and the world fall into the trap of supposing ‘God’ to be one of a number of actual or possible objects of experience, expectation and discourse.’⁵⁶ And once God is reduced to being a thing, even of a particular and peculiar kind, alongside other things then love of God is set in competition with other loves and rendered liable to being confused with and co-opted by them.⁵⁷ But the point is that ‘God is not, and can never be, one of a number of possible objects of consideration and use, nor is relationship with God one of a number of possible human loves.’⁵⁸ Far from standing within the order of things, God is the ‘incomprehensible mystery’ on

⁵¹ ‘The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’, p. 20, citing Emile Durkheim, ‘Concerning the Definition of Religious Phenomenon’, in *Durkheim on Religion: A Selection of Readings and Bibliographies*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 88; also ‘Hollow Centres and Holy Places’, *BAEOR*, p. 190; ‘Hoping Against Hope, or Abraham’s Dilemma’, *ibid.*, p. 200; *HSS*, pp. 38–9.

⁵² *BTWOG*, p. 21; ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, p. 50.

⁵³ ‘The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’, p. 21; also ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, p. 50; *BTWOG*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ ‘The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’, p. 21; also *MOH*, p. 136.

⁵⁵ See *EIO*, pp. 231–2, 257; ‘Observation, Revelation, and the Posterity of Noah’, p. 86; ‘When Did the Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?’, *BAEOR*, p. 136; ‘Creation, Courtesy and Contemplation’, p. 169; ‘Should Christianity be Credible?’, *TODB*, pp. 77–85 (p. 84); *MOH*, p. 167; *HSS*, p. 14, 16–7, 18–9, 23

⁵⁶ ‘Criticism or Construction?’, *TOWE*, p. 13; also ‘How Do We Know Where We Are?’, *TOWE*, p. 72; ‘Can a Theologian Keep the Faith?’, *TODB*, pp. 45–59 (pp. 48–9).

⁵⁷ See *EIO*, p. 165

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196; also *BTWOG*, p. 21.

which the entire order of things depends for its 'origin, significance and destiny.'⁵⁹

Similarly, if God is not one further particular thing amongst others, nor can religion simply be one further activity amongst others, pertaining to a discrete area of human experience. Setting his face squarely against 'the characteristically modern belief that the subject-matter of theology is religion, and that the business of religion is with the private heart rather than the public world', Lash takes as fundamental the classical Thomistic principle as to the unlimited extent of the theological concern to view '*all things* in relationship to God, their origin and end.'⁶⁰ As we find in the Frontispiece to *The Beginning and End of Religion* and subsequently reinforced throughout:

These essays address the subject matter of theology: is it the mystery of God, and everything there is considered in relation to that mystery as source, and life, and destiny? Or is it what we call 'religion' and 'religious belief': a district of experience and language and behaviour which individuals may inhabit if they feel so inclined... a territory quite distinct from those we know as 'politics' and 'art', as 'science' and 'law' and 'economics'?⁶¹

In this regard Lash never tires of citing and drawing out the implications of Rahner's principle to the effect that 'the experience of God must not be conceived of as though it were *one* particular experience among others...'⁶² For Lash as for Rahner, '...each and every aspect of the human quest – in all its bewildering, uncontrollable and often conflictual diversity – is an aspect of the quest for God, even when it is not so named or characterized.'⁶³ The implication for Lash is that 'Christian truth is not 'religious' truth, but truth sacramentally displayed and exhibited.'⁶⁴

⁵⁹ 'Criticism or Construction?', p. 13; *MOH*, p. 141.

⁶⁰ 'Beyond the End of History?', *BAEOR*, p. 254 and 'Criticism or Construction?' p. 12, citing Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Vol. I, Theology*, T. Gilby (ed.), (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 1a.1.7 (pp. 26–7); also 'The Church and Christ's Freedom', *TODB*, p. 140; 'Should Christianity Be Credible?', *ibid.*, p. 79; 'Introduction', *TOWE*, p. xi; 'Criticism or Construction?', p. 13; *EIO*, p. 196; *BTWOG*, p. 21. Significant also here is Aquinas' discussion of religion in *Summa Theologiae, Vol. 39, Religion and Worship*, Kevin D. O'Rourke O.P. (ed.), (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 2a2æ.81.1–2 & 82.1–2 (pp. 10–7 & 34–9).

⁶¹ *BAEOR*, p. i; also 'Preface', pp. ix; 'Eagles and Sheep: Christianity and the Public Order Beyond Modernity', p. 236 & *passim*.

⁶² Rahner, 'The Experience of God Today', *Theological Investigations, Vol. XI*, trans. by David Bourke, (London: DLT, 1974), pp. 149–65 (p. 154), cited in 'These Things Were Here and but the Beholder Wanting', *TODB*, p. 156; compare *EIO*, pp. 219–53; also *HSS*, p. 93. Lash also works this theme out in relation to the writings of Friedrich von Hügel and Martin Buber, see 'These Things Were Here...', p. 156; 'Human Experience and the Knowledge of God', *TOWE*, pp. 151–3; *EIO*, pp. 141–198.

⁶³ 'Criticism or Construction?', p. 14; also 'How Do We Know Where We Are?', *TOWE*, pp. 66–9; 'Human Experience and the Knowledge of God', pp. 141–57. See also n.24 here.

⁶⁴ 'Introduction', *TOWE*, p. xi. See also n.25 here.

So also, the religious task cannot properly be thought to consist in loving God *rather* than any particular aspect of finite creaturely reality as the most valuable *thing* in one's life but in loving God precisely *in and through* proper love of creatures. Alternatively stated, if the task of theology extends to *understanding* all things in relation to God, the task of religion – of giving God what God is justly due – extends to *loving* and *living* all situations in relation to God: 'Everything we do and suffer, enact and tolerate and undergo, all the good and all the evil that we do, contribute either to our distance from or our proximity to God, either to sinfulness or holiness.'⁶⁵ Again, authentic Christian asceticism in this purview consists not in a contemptuous denial of the world and suppression of all desire, driven by the erroneous assumption that 'growing in the love of God' equates with 'learning to love creatures less', but in the reorientation and liberation of desire from 'possessiveness... attachment... predation' in order to desire things more fully in relation to God who is no *thing* but that upon which all things depend as source, sustainer and promised consummation.⁶⁶

III.4 Protocols Against Idolatry

But if God is not a thing, how can God be spoken in our language, fitted as it is to the world of things? In Lash's words, '[H]ow can the reality of God 'appear' in our language?' and how can this be done whilst recognising that the 'obedience of faith and the language of faith' necessarily point beyond themselves to 'objects that are not directly expressible', without which recognition our language is in constant danger of descending into idolatrous anthropomorphism?⁶⁷ Lash's response to such questions, again reflecting his own prioritising of the critical dimension of the theological task, is essentially to say "By way of vigilance and continual recognition of intrinsic inadequacy."

To support such a discipline of critical vigilance Lash appeals both to the external resources of philosophical, literary, historical, sociological and psychological criticism which he co-opts as essential tools of theological analysis and to certain '*internal correctives*', or

⁶⁵ *BTWOG*, p. 100; also 'The Church and Christ's Freedom', *TODB*, p. 141; *EIO*, p. 165; 'Creation, Courtesy and Contemplation', p. 173.

⁶⁶ 'Prophecy and Peace', *BAEOR*, pp. 26–48 (p. 38) and 'Hoping Against Hope, or Abraham's Dilemma', p. 211.

⁶⁷ *MOH*, pp. 141, 167; also pp. 168, 183; 'Should Christianity be Credible', *TODB*, p. 84.

intrinsic ‘protocols against idolatry’, already embedded within the Christian tradition.⁶⁸ Paramount here is the tradition’s recurrent ‘negative, apophatic, agnostic dimension’ that should act as an intrinsic check on all incautious anthropomorphism.⁶⁹ As he writes, ‘If the history of Christian faith and spirituality is a history of exuberant metaphor. . . it is – just as insistently – a history of silence, simplicity and iconoclasm: of a sense that what needs to be said cannot be said.’⁷⁰ Again, far from the doctrine of analogy contradicting this primary sense of the inadequacy of all of our language to the reality of God, Lash follows David Burrell and others in interpreting it as maintaining that whilst our words can properly refer to God as their true subject, we cannot know in what manner they refer nor, therefore, what exactly they mean when properly used of God.⁷¹ Further, these protocols for the disciplining of idolatry are not left at the level of vague generality but receive specific form in Christian discipleship corresponding to the tradition’s core understanding of the inextricably interrelated three-fold form of God’s eternal being and God’s being with the world.

IV. Christian Discipleship as the Education of Desire Within the Three-fold Way of God

As alluded to earlier, for Lash misplaced idolatrous desiring and devotion describes the near all pervasive character of the human condition rather than its exceptional distortion. So also, the disillusioning and disciplining of idolatry and the associated education and reorientation of desire and devotion this implies rightly represent the core activities

⁶⁸ See ‘Doing Theology on Dover Beach’, pp. 3–23; ‘Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy’, pp. 103–5; ‘Theory, Theology and Ideology’, pp. 134, 138; *EIO*, pp. 104, 261, 265; ‘Considering the Trinity’, *Modern Theology*, 2 (1986), 183–96 (p. 187); ‘On What Kinds of Things There Are’, *BAEOR*, pp. 93–111 (p. 100); ‘Hollow Centres and Holy Places’, *ibid.*, p. 194; ‘Incarnation and Determinate Freedom’, *ibid.*, p. 246.

⁶⁹ *MOH*, p. 168; also p. 183; ‘These Things Were Here. . .’, p. 159; *EIO*, pp. 49, 151; *BTWOG*, p. 21; ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, p. 62; ‘Contemplation, Metaphor and Real Knowledge’, p. 116; *HSS*, pp. 76, 84–5. Lash prefers phrases such as ‘*via negativa*’ or ‘apophatic theology’ over the more recent ‘negative theology’ which he views as failing ‘to indicate that. . . it is positive recognition of God’s *holiness* which generates the insistent habits of denial, the different ‘methods of antagonism’’ ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, pp. 54–5; also *HSS*, pp. 15, 17.

⁷⁰ ‘Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy’, p. 105; also ‘Criticism or Construction?’, p. 12; ‘Theory, Theology and Ideology’, p. 134; ‘Continuity and Discontinuity’, *TODB*, p. 30.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 106–114, drawing upon Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); see also Burrell, ‘Beyond Idolatry: On “Naming” the One – God’, in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honour of Michael J. Buckley*, Michael J. Himes & Stephen J. Pope (eds.), (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 28–37 (pp. 31–2).

of religious traditions rather than mere peripheral sidelines. Indeed, as Lash intones throughout *The Beginning and End of Religion* and elsewhere, the religious traditions are best understood as ‘schools whose pedagogy has, albeit differently in each case, the common twofold purpose of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire.’⁷² It is ‘in these schools that we learn to use the languages in which the sense of God is clarified – languages the disciplined use of which restrains us from naming as “God” any particular fact, object, thing, image, institution, or idea’.⁷³ Properly understood, of course, this is a pedagogy that extends beyond lessons in right thinking and right speaking to right worship.

Now, as might be expected, the specifically Christian expression of this common pedagogical concern reflects the tradition’s centrally defining belief in the Trinitarian reality of God and this not simply at the level of viewing the latter as the appropriate *telos* of right devotion beyond the disordered world of idolatrous distraction. For Lash, Christian pedagogy is not simply towards the Trinity, it is within and into the Trinity. As such, it is a pedagogy the specific patterning of which reflects the prior patterning of the three-fold being of God as inexhaustible mystery, uttered Word and outbreathed life-giving Spirit within which it unfolds. Moreover, the pattern Lash finds here is one of ceaseless mutual correction of ‘each of the three principal modes of our propensity to *freeze* the form of relation [with God] into an object or possessed description of the nature of God.’⁷⁴ Again, ‘the doctrine of God’s Trinity serves at one and the same time, to indicate where God is to be found and – by denying, at each point, that what we find there is to be simply identified with God – to prevent us from getting stuck in one-sidedness.’⁷⁵

For example, by expressing belief in God as Creator *ex nihilo*, the first article of the Creed acts as a permanent reminder that ‘God’s silent mystery... is quite indecipherable, incomprehensible, unknown’ in such a way as should guard against any idolatrous anthropomorphism and deluded sense of possession.⁷⁶ Equally, if

⁷² *BAEOR*, p. x; also pp. 21–2, 27, 35, 37, 50, 57, 60, 173, 208; *EIO*, pp. 241, 248, 258–9; *BTWOG*, pp. 21, 54, 77, 111; *HSS*, pp. 5, 10, 24, 39–40, 51. Lash acknowledges a debt to von Hügel in formulating this idea, see *EIO*, p. 167; also pp. 148–9, 162; ‘Human Experience and the Knowledge of God’, pp. 153, 156. Perhaps also significant here is Benedict’s understanding of the monastery as a ‘school of the Lord’s service’, see ‘Prologue’, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. by David Parry, (London: DLT, 1984), p. 4.

⁷³ *EIO*, p. 167.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 271; also pp. 267–72; *BTWOG*, pp. 7, 93–4, 106–7; ‘Human Experience and the Knowledge of God’, pp. 155–6; ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, pp. 61–4; ‘When Did the Theologians Lose Interest in Theology?’, p. 135; ‘Hollow Centres and Holy Places’, pp. 196–7.

⁷⁵ *EIO*, p. 267; also ‘Observation, Revelation, and the Posterity of Noah’, pp. 84, 90.

⁷⁶ *BTWOG*, p. 93; also ‘Theologies at the Service of a Common Tradition’, *TOWE*, p. 26; ‘Human Experience and the Knowledge of God’, p. 155; *EIO*, p. 268.

articulated in isolation ‘without correction from the standpoint of the uttered Word and outbreathed Spirit’, it is itself problematic in as much as, having made ‘an idol of the dark’, ‘it leaves us without good use for the word ‘God’ in such a fashion as encourages us ‘to set our hearts elsewhere: to worship some fact, idea or thing, some feature of the world (most probably, ourselves).’⁷⁷ Or, alternatively, ‘Idolatry’s seductive power may find expression in many forms of worship of the void, of gnosticism, nihilism and despair.’⁷⁸

In turn, the second article’s confession of ‘uttered Word’ counters alike any unqualified agnosticism that encourages us simply to project onto the void our own images writ large and any unchecked pantheistic tendency to identify the various signs of life *in* the world with the life *of* the world.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, ‘without corrective pressure from the standpoint of the other articles, it once more freezes faith into idolatry, this time by turning God’s address, God’s truth-giving speech, into our supposed possession, protected by a church now shrunken to a gnostic sect.’⁸⁰ Again, ‘Idolatry’s seductive power may find expression in all kinds of fundamentalism, traditionalism and nostalgia.’⁸¹

Likewise, the third article of the Creed serves to remind us that there is an intrinsic elusiveness, all-pervasiveness, transforming dynamism and continual freshness to the presence of God’s Spirit in the world – ‘all things’ inmost given life – in such a manner as resists the premature closures of either absolute negation or absolute possession: ‘it is in freshness and creativity, not in inherited stability, in new possibilities, not ancient meanings, that God is to be glimpsed.’⁸² Again, however, ‘without corrective pressure from the standpoint of the first and second articles... we are... at risk either of worshipping an abstract deity called ‘Life’, or else of worshipping the world.’⁸³ All life and freedom is indeed of God ‘but we may not make of life or freedom an object at which adoration stops.’⁸⁴

⁷⁷ ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, p. 63 & *BTWOG*, p. 93; also p. 107; *EIO*, p. 269.

⁷⁸ ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, p. 63.

⁷⁹ See *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *BTWOG*, p. 94.

⁸¹ ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, p. 63; also ‘Human Experience and the Knowledge of God’, p. 156; *EIO*, p. 271.

⁸² *BTWOG*, p. 106 & ‘Human Experience and the Knowledge of God’, p. 155.

⁸³ *BTWOG*, p. 94.

⁸⁴ ‘Reality, Wisdom and Delight’, p. 64; also ‘Human Experience and the Knowledge of God’, p. 155; *EIO*, pp. 267–8.

Tying all of this together he writes:

The Christian doctrine of God, the doctrine of God's Trinity, is thus the threefold figure that furnishes the grammar for our education from threefold idolatry – from worship of the dark, from worship of the uttered word and from worship of the living world – into the freedom of confession of God's holy mystery as all things' source, and sense, and harmony; as all things' origin, and healing word, and destined peace; as Father, Son and Spirit.⁸⁵

Again:

As I understand it, the Christian account of God, the doctrine of the Trinity, is a doctrine of the unknown God inasmuch as it is never and nowhere appropriate to 'stop the dance', to interrupt the dialectic of experience and to say: *this* and this alone is what we mean by 'God'; *here* and here alone is his presence and activity to be discerned.⁸⁶

For Lash, then, Christian learning reflects the *perichoretic* being of God from which and into which such learning takes place. Furthermore, given what he consistently maintains about the primacy of the lived, practical dimension of Christian faith over its conceptualisation and reflection, it is little surprise that he looks for the exemplary expression of this pedagogy of grace not to his fellow theologians but to the saints. As he writes, 'The 'truthfulness' of Christianity, as of Marxism, is primarily a practical matter. . . Most people know this, rightly recognizing that saints are more important than theologians.'⁸⁷ And again, 'it is only in the attainment of holiness. . . that the truth of the Christian doctrine of God – of the claim that authentically human existence is life lived in response to and in the presence of the holy mystery of God – can be (perhaps persuasively) *displayed*.'⁸⁸

But to leave things here would be to individualise Christianity inappropriately by neglecting to treat of the proper theological significance of the social, structural and political dimensions of human existence on which Lash also lays such stress. The pedagogical performance of Christian faith is not a learning in isolation but in the ways of transformed and transforming communion, of holiness of life together, of polity, procedure, 'structures, activities and relationships'.⁸⁹ As such, it is either evidenced or not by the life and practice of the Church – the communion of saints – collectively rather than by individual holiness alone. Here, for all the reasons earlier noted concerning our propensity for idolatrous self-delusion, vital distinctions need to be

⁸⁵ 'Reality, Wisdom and Delight', p. 64; also p. 69; *EIO*, pp. 111, 172, 280–1.

⁸⁶ 'Human Experience and the Knowledge of God', p. 156.

⁸⁷ *TOWE*, p. 138.

⁸⁸ *EIO*, p. 275.

⁸⁹ *MOH*, p. 75; also 'Theory, Theology and Ideology', *TOWE*, p. 138.

drawn ‘between what Christians “think” the Church is and what it “really is and does”.’⁹⁰ In turn, this gives a specific ecclesial focus to the task of the critical theologian:

[T]o the critical or negative responsibilities of Christian theology, as critique of idolatry, there corresponds the duty to establish... that Eucharistic counter-culture of the virtues, that ‘peopleness’, responsive to the mystery of God, which is what the Church is meant to be.⁹¹

V. Conclusion

In the context of exploring Lash’s play upon Newman’s use of the three-fold office of Christ in the Church to speak of the necessary interrelation between the priestly (devotional), prophetic (theological) and kingly (administrative) dimensions of Christian life, this essay started out by treating of Lash’s understanding of the primarily critical function of theology, at least as properly pursued within the academic environment. The central body of the essay then traced the way in which Lash frequently treats of this theme under the category of idolatry and, with this, of the task of theology as one of idolatry critique. Here, attention was given to four points in particular: (i) that idolatry consists in the mistreating of some aspect of finite, creaturely reality as of absolute significance; (ii) that this is a matter of devotion and practical priority and not simply cognitive confusion; (iii) that all such idolatrous misplacing of the heart fundamentally fails to appreciate that God is no *thing* at all and religion, consequently, no discrete area of activity and experience alongside others and (iv) that the Christian tradition has considerable resources at its core for the critical countering and disciplining of this all-pervasive idolatrous tendency. In turn, the final section of the essay attended to Lash’s understanding of the specific education in right desiring and true devotion in which the Christian tradition consists. The essay culminated in appreciation of Lash’s recognition of the performance of the Church, for good or ill, as Christianity’s primary pedagogical resource and, with this, of the responsibility of critical theology to the constructive shaping of this performance.

For his own part, Lash has published numerous short articles in places such as *The Tablet* commenting critically on particular aspects of ecclesial practice and offering specific proposals for their

⁹⁰ *MOH*, p. 75, citing Marx ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, *Political Writings, II, Surveys from Exile*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 174.

⁹¹ ‘Hollow Centres and Holy Places’, p. 196.

improvement.⁹² Likewise, he regularly makes reference to some of the critical ecclesiological implications of his thought in the course of his more academic writings. Rarely, however, does he treat of such issues at any length. He poses the question, '[W]hat kind of community is it that might be realistically and concretely envisaged as the symbolic or sacramental expression of... a hope that is effectively critical of all idolatrous absolutization of particular places and times, nations and destinies, projects and policies?' and typically responds by pointing to the promise represented by the burgeoning of base ecclesial communities 'from Latin America to Africa, from Asia to the United States.'⁹³ Lash's is a theology that has been articulated, as his mature years have been lived, 'on the way to Emmaus';⁹⁴ a theology articulated, that is, beyond the disappointing and disillusioning of great hopes for unambiguous change and refocused instead on recognising and attending to the surprising and generally only partially realised historical movements of God in Christ and the Spirit.

In focussing upon Christianity as a school of learning to walk in the ways of God's freedom and, with this, upon the Church as sacramental of the deep human story well told, what Lash has done is to identify the lines along which the critical task of theology as a political theology of the Church should be properly pursued. In holding the aspiration for an enticing articulation of the Church as humanity transfigured together with a grounded account of the lived reality of Church and the pragmatics of ecclesial change this would be a performance of critical theology in the vein of what Nicholas Healy has referred to as 'practical-prophetic ecclesiology.'⁹⁵ In bringing the priestly (constructive devotional), prophetic (critical theological) and kingly (organisational political) voices into necessary conjunction, this would be to follow in the lines of Lash's work and to take it forwards in the most appropriate manner, ever mindful of the inevitable partiality of all such attempts and their consequent need of permanent critique and potential revision. As Lash would rightly note, even when the critical is conjoined with the constructive, the task of theology is one of continual departure and only anticipated arrival. Anything less would be to make of theology an idol rather than idolatry's

⁹² E.g., 'On Not Inventing Doctrine', *The Tablet*, (22 March 1997), p. 367; 'A Papacy for the Future', *The Tablet*, (11 December 1999), pp. 1678–9; also 'Vatican II: Of Happy Memory – and Hope?', in *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years After Vatican II – Essays for John Wilkins*, (New York & London: Continuum, 2003), Austen Ivereigh (ed.), pp. 13–31.

⁹³ 'The Church's Responsibility for the Future of Humanity', *TOWE*, p. 191 & 200; also pp. 197–201; *EIO*, p. 215.

⁹⁴ See 'Preface', *TOWE*.

⁹⁵ See Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

sustained critique in service of the anticipated showing and glimpsing of something of God's truth in the Church.

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