On Organizing the Concept of Divinity

Chapter One

I. Pandora’s Box of Divinities

The contemporary problem in theology is not a poverty of concepts of divinity. Rather, after nearly a century of careful ecumenical studies within Christianity, and with the sudden burst of serious dialogue among world religions, there are too many concepts of divinity, theistic, atheistic, and otherwise. Some appear to be highly analogous, others contradictory or incom-mensurable. We have passed well beyond the theological situation of condemnation of the Other as such, and are thankfully passing beyond the time when differences are being obscured by mellowed out fellow feeling. The contemporary problem in theology is to construct a concept of divinity that functions to organize the multitude of concepts, symbols, images, and referring practices so that the questions of agreement, disagreement, and truth can be formulated. A discussion of theology as a discipline to do this will be found in the next chapter. The topic here is to present a candidate for an organizing theological conception.

Perhaps some readers will object to this order. Kant, after all, argued that, just as one must understand one’s instrument before using it, so one should understand knowledge and its limitations before endeavoring to know. His strategy was to identify some particular kind of knowledge that everyone agrees is well founded and to determine the conditions that make that knowledge possible; then, everything that meets those conditions can be legitimated as knowledge, but what extends beyond that is suspect. Kant’s influence on theology has been great and baleful. Some have taken him to have proved that only scientificlike knowledge is legitimate, and thus eliminate the kinds of reflection on divinity that don’t conform to scientific ways of access; theology from these people usually turns out to be social-
scientific anthropology, and Karl Barth (1957) demonstrated the theological poverty of this. Others have learned a trick from Kant and declared some special theological orientation to be knowledge on faith, and from this deduced whatever conditions would make such an orientation to be cognitive in its fashion; this legitimates various forms of fideism, and could be used to legitimate any crazy thing whatsoever. Worst of all, many of our best minds, who decline to be taken in by either of those frustrating ploys, have been so preoccupied with the conditions for doing theology if they were to do it that they have not gotten to the first-order business in a steady and thorough way.

Hegel saw through Kant’s mistake and said that you can’t tell what your instrument can do until you’ve used it in as many ways as can be imagined. You can’t tell what cognitive result your method leads to until you’ve gotten there and examined the result in thorough fashion. Cognitive method itself is a suspect idea, if it means that a method’s results are supposed to be valid because of the method. Rather, cognitive methods are judged to be good if they give rise to results broadly determined to be worthwhile. To believe there are serious cognitive methods in the true strict modern sense is an error; there are, rather, guesses, disciplines, and habits of mind that are heuristically fruitful, more or less.

The strategy for this book is to launch out on an organizing theological concept, employing the intellectual resources and procedures that suggest themselves. Because this is one of the most exciting and innovative times for the study of religion, there should be no lack of resources for theology. Should a reader object that the argument here seems not to be following out a favorite approach, is not part of an identifiable project outlined by some other authority, patience is in order. The argument here is cumulative and, if the current approaches seem unpromising, wait for a change. Evaluation of the result depends on examining it from as many sides, and with as many shifts beyond first appearances, as possible. The problem is to organize the welter of reflective approaches to divinity.

To respond to God’s call, to call out at God’s silence, to enjoy divinity in the starry sky above or the moral law within; to tremble before God’s mystery and fecundity, to dance with the divinity of nature’s round, to transform resignation into celebration of God’s story that will move beyond ourselves; to recognize God in the particularity of the world, to bow to the sacred actuality of existence, to take the temporal as resting in the eternal; to quest for God as ground and goal of our being, to find our path through the invisible eternal harmony of things, to go on to perfection: all these require that we have interpreters of God.
The construction of this list of references to divinity is guided by an interpretive scheme. The first three interpret divinity in the rough categories of the personal, ordering, moral, and judgmental Sky God. The second three pick up the interpretive frame of the Earth Mother, fertile, circular, and more extensive than personal. The third triad assumes the interpretive frame that focuses the question of being, of finite contingency and temporality. The fourth interprets divinity in terms of spiritual quest. This list of four—Sky God, Earth Mother, Existential Source, and Spiritual Goal—prefigures a typology to be developed in this book. Furthermore, the first reference in each triad emphasizes divinity as making a demand or laying a condition; the second emphasizes the human response to this; and the third interprets divinity in terms of its bearing upon some aspect of religious life.

Nothing in this list suggests that the references are compatible. Quick reflection on the history of religions suggests much evidence that they are not. The war between the Sky God of order and righteousness (Yahweh) and the natural cycles of the Earth Mother (Astarte, Anat, Ishtar) is well chronicled in the Hebrew Bible, if only from the side of the cult of the former (von Rad, 1962: 16–35, 80–84, 444; 1965: 14–25). Both Sky God and Earth Mother employ principal symbols of theistic divine agency, and in this together have often been at loggerheads with the mystical traditions for whom the fundamental interpretants have arisen through the contrast between the contingency of ordinary life and divine ultimate reality; this tension is illustrated in most forms of Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as in Western mystics such as Eckhart, Boehme, the Cabalists, and the Mu'tazilites. All three of these families for interpreting divinity, however, emphasize some kind of transcendence, and this remains in tension with the secular and inward turn of those chiefly concerned with personal and social transformation along spiritual lines. Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism, and much of the practical orientation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam resist or give only lip service to motifs of transcendence. If all these references to divinity turn out to be compatible, it is not because they fit neatly with one another, nor because any one can give a fair, non-reductive representation of the others. In fact, each represents the others as deficiencies, or threats.

As if this quick review were not enough to cast doubt on the empirical compatibility of the main figures for divinity, the list above represents only a fraction of the major religious symbols, and it was constructed according to a general scheme that is bound to be limited and exclusive. There are thousands of symbols for divinity, distinguished by use and context if not always by name: Joseph Campbell's * Masks of God* shows at least this much.
How do the symbols relate? We cannot tell even whether they are in disagreement or contradiction unless we have univocal interpretive schemes to refer them to one another. Therefore, the problematic situation calling forth theology is not just the need to provide well-formed interpretants to reflect on divinity in diverse ways. Rather the need is to provide unifying interpretants that allow for determination of the relations among the other interpretants.

"Interpretant" is a technical conception that will be explained in the next chapter and chapter 10. A preliminary word will suffice here to indicate its role in theology. In the theory of interpretation arising from the American philosopher Charles Peirce, an interpretant is a sign that takes another sign as standing for an object in some respect. In theology, a systematic interpretant is a complex theory that interprets other signs, such as Lawgiver, Principle of Plenitude, Ground of Existence, or Savior, as standing for divinity in the respect appropriate for each. A systematic theological interpretant also must be able to interpret how the historical and mythic conceptions stand for divinity in appropriate respects, for instance, Yahweh, Allah, Buddhist Emptiness, or Brahman. If the respects in which these and many other religious symbols allegedly represent divinity cannot be integrated into a common theory, we are at a loss to know about their collective validity or mutual bearing. The symbols themselves do not need to be integrated; rather, integration is required for the various respects in which they can or have been taken to represent divinity. No symbol by itself represents anything. Only symbols in an interpretation represent (Neville, 1989: chs. 1, 3, 16). The interpretant, rather than the symbol alone, thus is the operative theological intelligence. The theological task of our time is to develop interpretants that allow us to see how the symbols, concepts, gestures, and other meaningful signs of religious practice do indeed represent divinity in some important respect, or fail to do so. This book offers a systematic candidate for such an interpretant, with an acute consciousness of how limited, parochial, and thus unduly insensitive any candidate must be.

The distinction between God in the logical place of an "object" in an interpretive process and God interpreted to be an object is crucial to note at the outset. The logic of interpretation as such places God or divine matters in the position of being an object of interpretation; this by itself does not prejudice what God is interpreted to be, and is also compatible with the claim made in some religious traditions that the process of interpretation itself is divine activity. To interpret God to be an object among others, however, is a project surviving in the twentieth century almost exclusively in process theology and evangelical theology. Most theologians, at least from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and many since, have interpreted God to be
"prior to the distinction between subject and object," to use Tillich's phrase (1959: 20 - 29), and therefore not an object. According to the speculative theology to be advocated here, all determinate objects are among the things created, and so God can be called an object only insofar as one refers to that abstract part of the divine reality that itself is the result of divine creation, running the risk of idolatry (Neville, 1968: 94 - 119; 1982: 51 - 55).

A proper theological concept of divinity should, from the beginning, be recognized as multilayered. Three main layers can be distinguished: the comprehensive, the dimensional, and the thematic. These together provide an archeologically deep conception of divinity.

The speculative hypothesis has two parts, an ontology, underlying the comprehensive layer, and a primary cosmology, underlying the dimensional. The next two sections of this chapter shall discuss these in turn, and the concluding section shall spell out the theological significance of the ontology and primary cosmology and relate them to the thematic layer.

II. An Ontology

The ontology is that of creation ex nihilo, interpreted in a particularly abstract way. This section shall present the idea in a straightforward philosophic form. Other chapters shall restate the idea in variant ways for their own purposes. On the abstract interpretation required for ontology, creation ex nihilo is creative activity with three identifiable features: the world created, the source of creation, and the activity itself. The three are indissolubly united. There could be no activity without the actual creation of something; there could be no world without its being created; and there could be no creator without the creating. Each depends on the other two, and together they make up creation ex nihilo.

Beginning with the world as created product, the defining mark of being created is determinateness as such. Anything determinate is created because it is contingent in two senses. In the first sense, a determinate thing is contingent on its relations with other determinate things with respect to which it is determinate. To be determinate is to be this-and-not-that; every this needs a that. These relational contingencies can be called "cosmological" because they are internal to the cosmos. In the second sense, a determinate thing is contingent in its very being on being created, an "ontological" contingency. What a thing is, is a matter of cosmological contingency; but that it is, is a matter of ontological contingency.

Determinate things must be together in a deeper way than is constituted by their cosmological relations. This is an implication of the nature of determinate identity itself. To be determinate, to have an identity of its own,
a thing must have two kinds of features. One kind is conditional upon connections and relations with other things. A determinate thing cannot be reduced to its relational or conditional features, however; it needs essential features of its own, and is indeed a harmony of its conditional and essential features. The claim that a thing is a harmony of the two kinds of features is the most general metaphysical claim in this ontology. Although this is not the place to argue for it in detail—chapter 4 will do that—it is not difficult to see that this is a more neutral definition of determinate identity than most other candidates. For instance, it avoids the supposition that a thing is a substance with features attached; it avoids the claim that things are but projections or reflections of mind; it avoids the limitation of "thing" to static things and can include changing, evanescent, and properly eternal things.

Because a thing is cosmologically contingent on other determinate things, it must be together with those other things in an ontological context of mutual relevance. The mutually conditioning relational features things give one another would be impossible without the essential features of all the things, because the conditional features exist only in harmony with essential ones: otherwise, there would be no things of which the conditional features are features. Since things are harmonies necessarily of both essential and conditional features, the mutual connections of the cosmological conditions are dependent on a deeper ontological connection that includes the essential and conditional features together. According to the hypothesis of creation ex nihilo, that deeper connection, that ontological context for mutual relevance, is the fact that the things are created together. The context is their mutual being-created. The context is not a determinate envelope, which would be just one more determinate thing whose essential features would have to be together with those of the things it contains. Nor is the context a set of other things, for the same reason. Rather, the context in which essential features of diverse harmonies are together, thus allowing the conditional features to make cosmological connections, is the eternal, that is non-temporal and non-spatial, act of their being created together.

The claim that everything determinate is created has enormous consequences. Time, for instance, is created; so is space; and so is logical form, the realm of intelligibles sometimes thought to be the divine mind. The very determinateness of creation ex nihilo is itself the product of the act of creation. Indeed, any determinate character in the divine as creator is the contingent product of creation. This sounds somewhat paradoxical in reference to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a problem to which we shall return shortly. Nevertheless, this argument is the speculative rendition of that dialectical drive in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition to protest as
idolatry any identification of divinity with a determinate thing. The dialectic receives its concrete metaphoric expression in the mystical traditions of the West, as well as many of those of India and China; chapter 5 deals with this in careful detail.1

To understand the source of creation, it is necessary first to say that the creative act is utterly dependent on the source. Because all determinateness is the result of creation, there can be no determinate necessity for the source to do anything. Creation is its own reason. This bespeaks the sovereignty of God, as the theistic traditions have it, and the ultimacy of divinity as many Indian and Chinese have it. It is necessary second, however, to say that, apart from the creating, the source is utterly indeterminate, nothing; it is not even a potentiality for creating. Thus, the source is not even source except through creating. This bespeaks the utter transcendence of divinity over all things. But it is irrelevant to speak of divinity apart from creating; if one does, only atheistic language would be appropriate, for apart from creation the source would have no theistic features. Despite the logical dependence of all determinateness on the source, and despite the transcendence of the source itself over all determinateness, there nevertheless is the fact of creation: Therefore the source is creator of this world with all the determinate features involved in that. This bespeaks not only a definite character of the divine but also divine immanence. God’s nature is in the creatures created; Emptiness is Form.

The abstractness of this bare, ontological notion of creation ex nihilo cannot be exaggerated. No religion treats with this notion as such, only with specified, filled in versions of it. Nevertheless, the abstractness reveals an important dimension of ontology that is often lost in more concrete models taking their shape from the contours of the world. The relation between source and world is asymmetrical in causality: the source in its creative act causes the world. Of course the relation itself has three terms that require one another to be understood, and these terms are conceptually symmetrical: source, act, world. The “order of being,” however, is causally asymmetrical whereas the “order of knowing” is interdefinitionally symmetrical. Because of the latter condition, we can say that the related characters of source, act, and world are themselves the result of creation, as are all determinate things: without the actuality of creation, there would be no source, act, or world. On the other hand, the very meaning of the relation of the three is the asymmetrical causing of the world by the source in its creative act. Some thinkers define the idea of creation ex nihilo as unintelligible because they refuse to acknowledge the distinction between asymmetry in being and symmetry in conceptual interdefinition. Yet there is nothing
unintelligible in the distinction. The only objection could be that real creation is impossible, and that change is to be understood only in terms of rearrangement. But why assume, or postulate, that real creation is impossible? We shall return to that question.

An important, more specific, tradition of creation ex nihilo supposes that God is an individual, identifiable with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who creates the world out of nothing. This tradition denies an emanationist theory according to which the world is an overflow of the divine substance. But the view that God is an individual agent who creates ex nihilo is not compatible with the thesis that everything determinate is created. All individuals are determinate and hence created; God’s individuality emerges in the act of creating; it is not antecedent. A careful analysis of creativity would show that agency is the result of creation, not an independent cause (Cobb, 1965: 47–130). The radical hypothesis of creation ex nihilo advocated here for ontology makes it necessary to show how the theistic characteristics of divinity are located at something consequent to the ontological level of creativity. If it is possible to account for the archeological levels that depict God as an individual agent, without invalidating those levels, and yet to show how at the more abstract levels of creation ex nihilo the creator is indeterminate apart from creation and determinate precisely as creator, a great gain will be had; for we will have reconciled theism and God-beyond-God mysticism.

The act of creation itself takes its entire determinate character from its end-point, the created product. In one sense, then, the creative act is temporal, working to create each temporal being at its own time and relative to other times. In another sense, however, the creative act is eternal because the togetherness involved in ontologically contingent existence itself is the condition for temporal relations. This sense of the eternity of creation should not be confused with totum simul, the idea that God includes everything at once, for that is a temporal notion. Nor should it be confused with everlastingness, nor with logical nor seminal possibility. The eternity of the creative act is what our poets and profound thinkers have felt in contemplating the strange interpenetration of past, present, and future.

The model of world, source, and creative act is an extraordinarily abstract rendition of creation ex nihilo. Let me remark in passing, however, that it bears a considerable likeness to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, a likeness marred only because the abstract model lacks the archeological depth of the history of any of its terms (Neville, 1982: 69–91). The source is like the Father, the world as product is like the Logos-Son, and the creative act is like the Spirit. The unity of the three Persons of the Trinity is
nicely represented in the unity of the three features of creation *ex nihilo*. Not clearly represented in those features is any distinction between the created world in its secular sense and the Son as begotten, not made. The clarification of that point, however, must be left to an occasion devoted to the archeological retrieval of the dual aspects of the Son as the historical Jesus Christ and the Light of Lights. Before this can be done, it is necessary to move away from the ontological discussion of creation *ex nihilo* to more specific exemplifications.

III. A Primary Cosmology

The model of creation *ex nihilo* is so abstract that it is compatible with any determinate world whatsoever, and thus is not of much help without being made specific with regard to this world. The second part of the speculative hypothesis is a primary cosmology, by which is meant the categories that describe a determinate world as such. Aristotle offered such a cosmology in his theory of the Four Causes, and Whitehead presented a modern cosmology in *Process and Reality* (1929). Plato’s earlier theory in the *Philebus*, however, has a more accurate generality. Plato argued that the concrete world of temporal change must be analyzable in terms of Limit or order, the Unlimited or things-to-be-ordered, the actual Mixture of these two, and the Cause of Mixture. Each of these will be specified in turn and indications given concerning how they might direct the archeological ordering of religious phenomena.

1. By Limit Plato meant determinate standard measure, order, or pattern. As something necessary for a thing’s being created, the category of Limit collects those religious phenomena having to do with order being imposed on chaos, or on the relatively disordered. “Imposition” is a vague word here, but it indicates that the existence of order in something itself needs an account. In an array of myths, concepts, or images of God, the imposition of order might mean the God’s physical battle, as Marduk’s fight with Tiamat, the God’s habitual physical armamentarium, as Zeus’s thunderbolts, the God’s kinglike command evoking obedience, as in the Genesis 1 story, or the God’s setting of the terms of a contract, as in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. Indeed, the Christian view of God as intervening in the degenerate history of sinful people by sending an incarnate agent of the Logos, by acting to ransom the captives to sin so as to restore the order of divine sovereignty, presents a view of imposed order.

Let us call the primary cosmological category of imposed order the “masculine” dimension of divine creativity, in accordance with the contrast
emphasized by feminist theology. This category allows us to isolate and examine a dimension in a great many religious phenomena from many cultures. Furthermore, this category in conjunction with the others allows for a dimensional analysis of individual complex phenomena, images, or concepts. That is, whatever else Paul’s story of redemption contains, for instance, at least it contains the masculine dimension of God imposing again the Adamic order; this didn’t happen naturally, but by the explicit agency of God the Father.

2. Plato paired Limit with the Unlimited, that which is to be ordered. To speak of the Unlimited in terms of potentiality for taking on order, however, is a biased view to which Plato did not succumb. The Unlimited is a kind of driving fecundity, a power of production that is shapeless except for the patterns accidental to it. Furthermore, the Unlimited is so far from being reducible to ordered or even orderable stuff that it constantly moves beyond and overthrows the patterns that temporarily characterize it. What needs explanation is not the Unlimited as such but why there is any or some particular pattern ingredient in the fecund process. Any one thing is a harmony of components. Take away the pattern of the overall harmony, and the patterned components remain; take away their patterns, and the components of the components remain, and so forth. From the standpoint of any intended harmony, the jeopardy of the surface pattern reveals the potential chaos beneath. From the standpoint of the components beneath, each has its own career that only accidentally coheres with the careers of the other components according to the overall pattern. Each harmony thus threatens to fly off into its constituent parts; or if the harmony itself makes the parts possible, then the whole threatens to dissolve.

Language that dwells on the threatened loss of pattern, in the value-laden sense of pattern, reflects the masculine perspective of order. So does the apparently opposite language lauding the power of the blind dynamic forces to destroy an evil order and to remove oppression. The normativeness of order, whether it be good or evil order, is a function of the imposed pattern itself. God as masculine imposer of order is also lawgiver and judge, and executioner. By contrast, the Unlimited is the feminine dimension of sheer fecundity, blind natural or inertial movement that creates and destroys, morally oblivious to the worth of the patterned harmonies temporarily achieved. One thinks of the ferocity of Kali or Shakti, or the remorseless demands of Astarte’s rhythms of nature (see Dexter, 1990; Kingsley, 1989). This is by no means a complete characterization of a religious meaning of the feminine. It ignores any emphasis on the weaving of local and domestic order, on continuities, on special attunements with nature’s powers (see Keller, 1986).
Yet in their way, those "weaving" kinds of harmony are usually taken for granted as the underpinnings, the components, of the harmonies whose patterns we notice as imposed. They are prior to the orders of special moral interest. Indeed, the feminine dimension directly points to the intensity of depths in things, to the fact that anything is an infinitely dense harmony of harmonies of harmonies, and that the lower components are the conditions of the higher. The feminine dimension is the matrix of any specifiable thing.

We may note the commonplace that the Judeo-Christian tradition has done very poorly in recognizing and developing phenomena, images, and concepts that embody the feminine dimension. The cult of the male Yahweh seems to have been in direct opposition to the cults of the feminine or feminine-oriented nature religions. Yet, given the number of times the cult of the Goddess had to be cleaned out of the Solomonic Temple, she must have had a powerful attraction. Christianity's long exclusion of women from the priesthood, indeed its conception of church order as an exceedingly masculine hierarchical order, expresses a deep hostile sensitivity to the feminine dimension. Indirectly, therefore, even the unbalanced masculine aspects of patriarchal religions can testify that determinate things require the Unlimited as well as Limit in being created.

More important for the point than the explicit masculine bias of the Judeo-Christian tradition is its emphasis on the embodiedness or incarnational quality of the created order. God is not represented finally as creating by imposing order on a pre-existent stuff, although Genesis might be taken that way. Rather, God creates the stuff as well as its order. This is the elementary and common meaning of creation *ex nihilo*, of which the refined notion above is only one version. Furthermore, not just the order but the stuff and order together are ontologically good. Christian gnosticism lost out to the tradition's feminine instinct (as well as to the swords of the orthodox) by not recognizing the ontological parity of order and fecundity.\(^a\) Indian gnosticism has remained a viable religious path in some considerable measure because it put order and fecundity on the same level right from the start. By recognizing the feminine dimension in conjunction with the masculine, religious express a feel for the fact that the contingency of things is contingency both on order and internal power. To the extent that religions fail to express both sides, they have a side hidden to their own overt practices, symbols, and concepts.

3. What Plato termed *mixture* calls attention to actuality or existence. In a sense, order and internal powers are abstract elements of concrete things, important enough to be symbolized on their own but abstract nevertheless. Their mixture is reality itself, the actualization of possibility, the
existent as opposed to the nonexistent. Time itself is essential to existence in the full sense. Existentialist theology has developed this theme in detail (Tillich, 1951: pt. II); but earlier Thomas Aquinas thought he found it in Moses’ citation of God’s name as I Am That I Am. Eliade (1959) found the theme in even earlier elements of mythopoeic religion, in which the ordering of nature’s powers by the establishment of a center is an aboriginal, in illo tempore, creation. The problematic of death and resurrection, of eternal life and immortality, is powerfully formed by what can be called the existential dimension. So is the emphasis on the individuality of things and on the particularity of God’s or Buddha’s love. Even the distinction Christians draw between divine agape and eros is dependent on some sense of the distinction between the sheer fact that concrete things exist and what it is that exists. In addition to the analysis of religious phenomena, images, and concepts in terms of the masculine and feminine dimensions, it is necessary to understand their existential dimension.

4. Plato’s final category is the Cause of Mixture, by which he meant the normative measure, the balance or due proportion, according to which any given concrete thing can be what it is by virtue of its place and roles in the larger whole. If the points made above about the dynamism of the feminine dimension and the temporality of the existential dimension are on the mark, then the world is to be imaged as a great maelstrom of processes, each with its own inertia, structurally intertwining and untwining. Any given thing, for religious purposes a person or nation perhaps, needs an orientation to the whole, needs to find a center. A person needs to find a path or tao that harmonizes personal reality with the social world, with the larger natural world, with the ongoing flows of whatever processes register in the construction of reality. Not to have such a path threatens not only the orders of one’s life, and the availability of one’s internal component forces, but existence itself. The religious problem, what Christians call sin, consists in being off the path, though in some way normatively determined by it. In this sense, the Cause of Mixture is what makes possible the other dimensions. The Cause of Mixture can be called the soteriological dimension.

The soteriological dimension is expressed in many forms. Eliade (1959) rightly noted the soteriological function of centering spaces and times. The Christian notion that a particular history provides the dates that center or orient our relation to the rest of the cosmos expresses the soteriological dimension. That dimension is even found in the Genesis 2 creation story, in which Adam takes possession of the Garden of Eden by naming the animals and accepting the dietary condition. Perhaps Christianity is pe-
cular in its masculine emphasis insofar as it divides soteriological theology into problems of salvation dealt with by God’s act of redemption in Christ and the subsequent problems of sanctification through the indwelling Spirit. Both have to do with putting people on the path so as to be in harmony with the creation and with the covenant that is part of humankind’s creation. Indeed, the soteriological dimension is the fulfillment of creation.

The second part of the speculative hypothesis is that creation ex nihilo involves creating things with Limit, the Unlimited, Mixture, and the Cause of Mixture. Religions express creation ex nihilo insofar as they embody themselves in the masculine, feminine, existential, and soteriological dimensions. Religious phenomena, images, and concepts thus can be understood in a connected way by interpreting them according to these dimensions, which then allows comparison. The point of the speculative hypothesis about creation ex nihilo and the primary cosmology has been to lay the groundwork for an archeologically deep conception of divinity.

IV. The Archeology of God

The archeological structure of the interpretive hypothesis concerning divinity developed here recognizes three layers: the comprehensive, associated with the ontology, the dimensional, associated with the primary cosmology, and the thematic. These may be understood the following way.

1. There are two parts to the comprehensive layer of theological interpretation: the vague and the indefinitely specific.

A. The vague comprehensive interpretation of divinity is that God is the creating of the world ex nihilo. ("God" is perhaps misleading as a referent for divinity in this context because its theistic connotations are too specific for the vague level precisely intended.) The vague comprehensive interpretation of divinity as creation ex nihilo has various conceptual theological uses: for locating other candidate conceptions of God; for distinguishing between the fulness of God — which is Source, Act, and World together — and divine aspects that might be employed idolatrously; and for integrating the claims made within the dimensional and thematic approaches.

The vague comprehensive conception also has a direct experiential application in mysticisms that prescind from all more specific content. These include: mysticisms of ultimate transcendence, of Eckhart’s type; mysticisms of the act of existence, of Gilson’s, Maritain’s, Hopkins’, or Tillich’s types; and nature mysticisms, of Emerson’s type, that take nature to
be a token of divinity. Each of these focuses on one aspect of creation ex nihilo—source, act, or creature—but involves itself in the others because of the intimate presupposition of each in the others.

B. The second part to the comprehensive layer of theological interpretation is not vague but indefinitely specific. That is, the world created is taken to have some specific form, perhaps even several specific forms as represented in different traditions. The specificity of the created world makes the Creator a specific Creator. This part of the theological concept is "indefinitely" specific because the specifics need not be sorted into dimensions or themes, because there might be more specifics that could be included within the concept that simply are not, and because there may be incompatible versions of the specifics of the world. Most contemporary Western sophisticated Christians, for instance, take the created world both to be as science articulates and also to illustrate some version of the Christian historical story. A smaller set of such Christians might accept a difference, a contradiction, between the scientific specification and the Christian story, and perhaps might recognize that Jews and Muslims have variants on the story, variants all of which variously specify the notion of creation ex nihilo. Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing project took as its problem the fact that the specific created world was interpreted in the first century quite differently from the way it has been interpreted in the twentieth century.

At the comprehensive, indefinitely specific layer of theological interpretation, the contradictions among specifics can be sustained in their meanings and the question of their truth vis-à-vis one another held in abeyance. The question of the truth of specific interpretations is not to be decided by their compatibility with the notion of creation ex nihilo because each is compatible with that notion. The question of the truth of each representation of the specifics of the world is decided rather by considerations internal to the concrete experience that spawns them; relative to the speculative hypothesis, the truths of specifics are an empirical matter. At the comprehensive level, the law of excluded middle does not hold rigidly, and all can be accepted as possibly valid specifications of what creation might be, depending on the independent warrants for them. The experiential use of the comprehensive indefinitely specific notion of divinity is to interpret God as manifested in one's own and also in others' specific sense of the world. This is to interpret God as the subject of revelations.

2. Whereas the first layer of theological interpretation is comprehensive, and structured by the hypothesis of creation ex nihilo, the second is dimensional and is structured by the masculine, feminine, existential, and soteriological dimensions discussed above. Of course, there might be other
dimensions as well, but they would qualify on this scheme by virtue of being transcendental aspects of what it means to be created. The analytical interpretive function of dimensional analysis is to clarify the specifics of religious phenomena, images, and concepts with regard both to the distinctions among the dimensions and, perhaps more importantly, to their mutual implication in the created order. To note the heavy masculinity of the Yahwist cult of God as King and Lawmaker is at the same time to note the absence or hiddenness of feminine aspects and to note the bias in Yahweh’s existential and soteriological expressions (Daly, 1973). By comparison, the heavy femininity of the Taoists’ conception of the tao stands in irreconcilable juxtaposition to the masculine Confucian sense of principle, and the Taoists’ approach to the existential and soteriological dimensions has a feminine bias (Girardot, 1983; Neville, 1982: 131–145).

The experiential interpretive function of the dimensions is to allow us to take in and apprehend with intensity and clarity these dimensions of divinity, and perhaps of our own reality. The soteriological dimension particularly relates us self-reflexively to divine matters, although, if the primary cosmology is on the mark, it is a religious function of our creatureliness to relate to our masculine, feminine, and existential dimensions as well.

3. The thematic layer of the theological interpretation of God consists of the thematic clusters of symbols, narratives, and ideas that constitute most of the first-order language of religious scriptures, preaching, and practice. The narrative idea of Yahweh as covenantmaker and redeemer of Israel, or as acting in Christ to redeem the world, are two such themes; as we will see later in noting its development from Slayer of Rahab to Loving Spirit, the Yahweh theme has historical depths in its archeological layers. Themes have subthemes, sometimes incoherent with one another. The theme of substitutionary atonement, for instance, is a common way of making sense of God’s action in Christ; the subtheme that interprets atonement in terms of Israelite sacrifice is quite different from the subtheme of union with God in Christ emphasized by John. Thematic material for theological analysis is found not only in theological writing but in ritual, song, and in the suppositions of practices such as petitionary prayer, infant baptism, and the rest.

The historically diverse and archeologically deep themes of religion arise and develop on their own because they seem at the time rightly to focus, epitomize, and abstract out what seems important in the context. Part of historical understanding is to determine how, why, and with what justification those thematic responses arose and developed. A crucial part of critical theology is to determine how those themes articulate the religious aspects of our own situation. As Gadamer and other hermeneutical
philosophers have argued, whether a theological theme can be a living vessel or religious truth for us depends in part on whether the horizon of meaning in which that theme developed connects with our own horizon of meaning. Those themes developed in the Bible, for instance, arose within an horizon of meaning separated from ours by many cultural breaks, including the post-Constantinian dominance of imperial Christianity, the development of the scientific world-view, and the political, military and economic dominance of Christian societies over much of the rest of the world. What kinds of connections can be made?

To the extent themes are expressions of historical fact, there can be historical continuity despite other changes in horizons of meaning. Yet, as David Tracy (1987) has argued, historical meaning, however “living,” is radically ambiguous. The events thematized might be thematizable in other ways, with conflicting meanings, e.g. the Druid rather than Roman view of the Christianization of Europe. Another connection between horizons of meaning might be that of plain continuity. The New Testament theme of the Triumph of Christ underwent continuous development through the Christian conquest of the Roman state, through the scientific revolution interpreted in bourgeois ways, and through Western imperialism.

Yet another kind of continuity, perhaps the most common, comes from giving the historically distant theme the status of an historical symbol. As an “historical symbol,” the theme can be appreciated now for the role it played in the past, and that role can be connected to our current existence in other important ways. For instance, contemporary Christians can repeat the Apostles’ Creed because it was the ancient baptismal formula and because they want to maintain continuity with the ancient Christian community; this reason for saying it in liturgy is rather independent of whether our contemporaries would affirm its propositional content, or express that content in the creed’s way. Similarly, contemporary Christians can appreciate the theme of Passover sacrifices in substitutionary atonement as having had real significance in the past, even though they would not use that language themselves to describe God’s action except to take it to be a predecessor of their own interpretation. By giving an historically symbolic status to a once immediate symbol, the symbol enriches our own horizon through its historical legacies.

None of these kinds of continuity between religious themes of other periods and our own speaks to the primary function of religious themes, of the vital myths, symbols, and doctrines. That primary function, of course, is to transform our own self-understanding, to break through what we take for granted and show us the demand for a better order, to display the powers of
processes we thought were tamed, to recall us to the irony of our finite/infinite existence, and to mark the narrow path of divine righteousness.\footnote{As Tillich pointed out (1956: pt I, and 1959: chs. 1, 4–6) about visual arts, it is not the representational content that makes a symbol religious, but its ontologically transformative power. The point holds for all theologically interesting religious themes.}

The immediacy of transforming religious themes is a snare of the devil, however, because it seduces from religion to aesthetics. The contemporary pseudo-cult of the Seeker, searching out emotionally satisfying and lifetitillating religious experiences, deflects attention and intention from divine things back to human feelings. So much of the emphasis on religious experience in our time is a naive worship of Narcissus, who wasn’t even a god.\footnote{Precisely for this reason, the themes that have power today need to be given archeological depth. They need to be related historically and thematically to the deep traditions of our various cultural embodiments of religion. And they need to be set in a context of theological connections, including analyses of their expressions of the four dimensions of creation and of how they relate to the ontological character of creation \textit{ex nihilo}. Thus one of the major functions of systematic theology is to contextualize the immediacy of religiously powerful themes in the connections of the historical depths of religion.}

The theological interpretation of living religious themes is not solely a function of connecting horizons of meaning and setting these in systematic relations. It is also and perhaps more importantly the interpretation of our current situation in light of its own demands and in light of the religious themes (Tillich, 1959). This dynamics is revealed in the dialectical interplay between the self-presentation of our situation and the historical resources brought to interpret it, including the theological ones. No one in our century has understood the contemporary cultural relevance of theology as well as Tillich. He argued (1952: ch. 2) that Christianity has moved through three major cultural contexts that shifted the valorizations of Christian symbols. The religious problem in the first Christian centuries, he said, was primarily that of death and immortality; by the time of the Reformation that problem had been submerged in the problem of guilt and forgiveness; those problems in turn in our own time have been transformed into the search for ultimate meaning in a world apparently without intrinsic meaning.

Tillich’s preoccupation with the intellectual fortunes of the European theological community prevented him from seeing an even greater change in religious context. Our problem now, it can be argued, is the challenge of
distributive justice. This problem subordinates, without removing, the subjective problems of personal anxiety and the search for immortality, forgiveness, and meaning, to the more objective problems of structural and attitudinal social change.

The answer suggested here and to be developed throughout the book to the need for an adequate interpretant for God is multifaceted:

1. The interpretant needs a comprehensive systematic concept, for which I have recommended the abstract idea of creation ex nihilo.
2. It needs that systematic concept to be specified in ways that are archeologically deep.
3. The interpretant needs, further, to be expanded so that the very created status of things can be analyzed in dimensions that mark the conditions of their creatureliness. The answer offered for this need is the primary cosmology of Limit, Unlimited, Mixture, and Cause of Mixture, interpreted religiously as the masculine, feminine, existential, and soteriological dimensions.
4. The interpretant needs, finally, to be opened up to receive all of the religious themes that have in their own time been revelatory.

These of course are not consistent with one another on their own terms, and the systematic structure of the comprehensive theological interpretant must be able to display what is at stake in this. Furthermore, not all the religious themes are of equal worth, either in themselves or as connected with other contexts; theology must continually be involved in critical assessment and comparison. The overall purpose of the theological interpretant, however, from beginning to end, is to have the interpretive means to encounter the divine in all its dimensions.

One might be tempted to respond to this treatment of fundamental theological interpretants with frustration: Just what is the concept of God after all? To this it must be said that insofar as there is a single concept, it is that articulated by creation ex nihilo. The frustration grows, however, because the God of creation ex nihilo is the God of speculative philosophers and maybe a few mystics. Of course. That is why such a dialectical interpretant by itself is inadequate and needs archeological depth. To achieve that depth, the dimensional and thematic layers of the theological interpretant need to be brought into the open. When this is done, God is seen to be a great many things in a great many contexts, with highly perspectival forms of integration. The theological interpretant thus in its fulness does too much, just as creation ex nihilo does too little.
This last criticism is not a serious one. For too long theology has been dominted by the (masculine?) demand for unity and order, for a single complex concept and a single story of its legitimation. The interpretant here for divine things is a (feminine?) counterbalance, inclusive of themes, dimensions, and comprehensive hypotheses that bespeak driving powers with a life of their own. The failure that recent experience has revealed in our more traditional interpretants is that they exclude too much that is valid. The time now calls for a somewhat unobsessive gathering in of diverse responses to the divine. The present chapter has attempted to balance this embrace of just about everything that moves with an order of levels of abstraction that positions the comprehensive, dimensional, and thematic layers. Nevertheless, ordering principle does not allow for a final, determinate, comprehensive statement of what the divine is; because of the vagueness of the organizing notions, tolerance of incompatibles and irrelevancies is inexpungeable.

The more we know about God, the more God is revealed to be more than we know. God’s depths are infinite. This means on the one hand that God as Creator is not constrained in any way by conditions to create, and it means on the other that the creation itself is infinitely rich as a field for our selectively responsive life and interpretation. That God in addition creates with infinite love is an evangel that gives hope to theology, as to all human enterprises. That the openness to the power of diverse symbols of the divine may call for revisions of the organizing comprehensive categories, perhaps even for abandoning theistic language for the Compassion of the Tao, sustains theology’s wonder and excitement.

It is impossible to conclude this chapter without a confession and an admission. The confession is that the equivocation between the terms “divinity” and “God” cannot be eliminated without falsifying the nuance of the argument. “Divinity” is properly vague, and can be made specific by the Tao, by Brahman, and by Confucian Principle as well as by God. “God,” on the other hand, is the traditional and cultic route by which the author came to think of divinity in the vague sense involved in creation ex nihilo. The particularity of being a Christian theologian concerned with theology claiming truth for all cannot be escaped.

The admission is the reverse of that point, and concerns another agenda of this book. The conception of God in Christian theology should be stretched from narrowly theistic limits, according to which God is an individual agent among others, to a broader conception of Creator inclusive of mystic sensibilities and open to comparison with non-theistic religious tra-
ditions. Within Christian life there are many contexts, both in appropriating Christian history and in cultic practice, in which God must be addressed as an individual, other than ourselves. But these are more circumscribed than is often thought, and not to recognize their limits is to accept an undue burden of primitiveness and over-genderization in theology. “God,” therefore, should not be construed in a narrowly theistic sense, but in a broad sense that is at home on the comprehensive level of theology as well as in the specifics of the Christian tradition: this broad reading is what Christianity needs.