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An Impossibly Indecent God?

Pursuing Questions of the Biblical God in the Church of Scotland through Churchgoers' and Marcella Althaus-Reid's Theological Ideas, Juxtaposed with Fragments of Jacques Derrida's Philosophy

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Acknowledgements

Level 10 in Glasgow University's library has a lot to answer for, because it was in one of its dimly-lit corridors (during one of those equally dark 2nd year undergraduate moments of invariably trudging through compulsory set-text readings) that I picked up a book that would change my life, quite literally: Marcella Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology*. Ever since that day, Marcella's ideas have invaded my thoughts about theology. Marcella was the original supervisor of this thesis. Now, looking back, the project has itself been shaped quite sharply through her illness and death – as she became less able to supervise, I searched for more questions within her writing; and, after her death, in the strangest of ways, I found myself writing differently as if sending an extended letter to Marcella knowing that the envelope would remain sealed. I didn't know Marcella well, but I dearly miss the 'Marcella' who packed strong imagination, wild radicalism and creative vision into her writing – pages and pages filled with sparks that still make theology seem, to me, a worthwhile endeavour. For pursuing dares to risky places with deep integrity, reckless humour and profound courage, I thank Marcella.

Before ever meeting her at Edinburgh University, I'm grateful for those friends who, during my studies in Princeton, urged me to apply for doctoral studies under Marcella's supervision in the first place; and without the financial support available to me through an AHRC studentship award, I would not have started the project – so I acknowledge the opportunities this offered. In Edinburgh, I am grateful to Cecelia Clegg for her help and advice at various junctures, most especially for her assistance during the preliminary tasks of designing an ambitious practical research project and the supervisory role she ably took on during Marcella's illness. In Glasgow, as principle supervisor, Yvonne Sherwood has offered supportive encouragement in ensuring the thesis reaches its conclusion, and further enhancing it by her great insight and creative flair. I'm very thankful to Yvonne for taking the personal risks involved in venturing, or perhaps wading, into the complex messy points of a thesis originally supervised by someone else. This thesis would, however, not exist without the many churchgoers in Edinburgh churches who freely gave their time, ideas and questions so graciously and for whom I owe sincere thanks. And, lastly, I mention the personal support of three remarkable women: Heather Walton, Lesley Orr, and Mhorag Macdonald. It is to each of you – Mhorag, Heather and Lesley – in different ways that I thank you most of all.

Abstract

Marcella Althaus-Reid was a theologian who dared to imagine differently, a thinker whose inventive style brought striking originality to her writings on sexuality and gender, people and God. Her work is remembered most noticeably in theological academia for her conceptual phrase, 'Indecent Theology'. In this thesis about questions of God, the innovative elements of Marcella's literary corpus are developed in new ways by placing her academic theories alongside a practical research study undertaken in the alternative milieu of Church of Scotland congregations in Edinburgh. This primary material, which has been analysed through interview and focus group transcripts, together with questionnaire responses, brings revealing insights to frame the emerging tensions between churchgoers and Marcella across the dimensions of its four chapters. In each, the following themes are developed: the ambiguities surrounding questions of asking who God might be; the considerations involved in recognising God's relationship with the Bible; the exploration of the extent to which sexuality and gender may influence God concepts; and the recognition of the role people play in evaluating their understandings of God in Christianity. Arranged in a rhythmical structure throughout, every chapter is first prefaced by a media-based report which contextualises relevant themes in a contemporary idiom, and is later concluded by a deconstructive postscript that, in fragmentary ways, invokes some critical concepts in the work of Jacques Derrida germane to the particular questions of God pursued in each.

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Preliminary Notes

The contents of this thesis draws heavily on four forms of in-text citations in particular – those which relate to the work of Jacques Derrida and Marcella Althaus-Reid, in addition to input from churchgoers accessed via practical research and contemporary media references. While citations related to Jacques Derrida's writing (and others' work about Derrida) follow conventional referencing throughout, *i.e.* (Derrida, 1982: 76; Caputo, 1997a: 1), references to those of Marcella Althaus-Reid's articles and books are featured by in-text citations that are bracketed without her surname, *i.e.* (2000: 200) instead of (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 200). Citations involving churchgoers are presented in a standard form that allows for cross-referencing to relative appendix sections, such as, for instance, (B, 58: 611-620) for focus group participants, (C, 188: 341) for interviewees and (App. D, Qn9) for questionnaire references. Newspaper reports are cited in a standard conventional form that allows for straightforward bibliographical consultation, *i.e.* (Sheerin, 2004, May 16).

Throughout the thesis, apart from just a few examples, 'Marcella Althaus-Reid' is referred to by her first-name, Marcella, only (except for bibliographical information, in which such entries follow convention and are named in full). The reasoning behind my decision in this regard is two-fold: firstly, largely from an aesthetic premise, filling many pages of repeated references to Marcella's work by her surname seemed not only to be unnecessary but also disruptive to the flow of how the thesis might be engaged with during reading; and, secondly, because churchgoers appear in the thesis by (anonymous) first-names only, choosing to similarly refer to Marcella by first-name also helped to flatten academic hierarchy between the different locales.

In terms of bibliographical decisions in this thesis, I have chosen to date list Marcella's articles by original publication. This means that, in *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (2004a) – a book in which she collated earlier published essays alongside new ones – I do not refer to those essays in this book but instead by their original date of publication. Lastly, I would like to note that I am aware that the work of Lisa Isherwood, with whom Marcella worked collaboratively on largely editorially-led project, features only minimally in this study. This was a difficult decision for me, but, in a very Marcella-led discussion such as the ideas of this thesis presents, in considering articles co-written it became very difficult to determine which thoughts were, in fact, Marcella's.

Introduction

Prefacing the Precepts

What happens when a great thinker becomes silent, one whom we knew living, whom we read and reread, and also heard, one from whom we are still waiting a response, as such a response would help us not only to think otherwise but to read what we thought we had already read under his [or her] signature, a response that held everything in reverse, and so much more than we thought we had already recognized there?

Jacques Derrida (2003: 6)

The supplemental shadows are linked with an unwanted dependency, a secret craving that theologies develop and without which they cannot gain access to coherence

Marcella Althaus-Reid (2006b: 114)

Act so that there is no use in a centre:
A wide action is not a width

Gertrude Stein (1997 [1914]: 37)

Why must we worry over so simple
a thing as preface-making?

Gayatri C. Spivak (translator's preface in Derrida,1976: *xiv*)

Perhaps, then, alongside the risk, there is also a chance to reaffirm the responsibility that calls to all those who … can refuse the foreclosures and still hold open the texts that can one to inherit a thinking of inheritance … Derrida confused up so as to learn to teach how to live – there is literally *no other place but in the others from which to write, speak, and sign*

Peggy Kamuf (2005: 3)

The deconstructive reading does not point out the flaws or weakness or stupidities of an author but the necessity *by which he [or she]* does *see is systematically related to what he [or she] does not see …*

Barbara E. Johnston (translator's preface in Derrida, 1981a: *xv*)

… in the possibility that an encounter with the impossible might shatter the narrow confines of the possible

Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2004: 296)

i.
Précis

The rules break like a thermometer,
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
we're out in a country that has no language no laws …
Adrienne Rich (1993: *poem xiii*)

Marcella Althaus-Reid was a theologian who dared to imagine differently, a thinker whose inventive style brought striking originality to her writings on sexuality and gender, people and God. Her work is remembered most noticeably in theological academia for her conceptual phrase, 'Indecent Theology'. In this thesis about questions of God, the innovative elements of Marcella's literary corpus are developed in new ways by placing her academic theories alongside a practical research study undertaken in the alternative milieu of Church of Scotland congregations in Edinburgh. This primary material, which has been analysed through interview and focus group transcripts, together with questionnaire responses, brings revealing insights to frame the emerging tensions between churchgoers and Marcella across the dimensions of its four chapters.

In each, the following themes are developed: the ambiguities surrounding questions of asking who God might be; the considerations involved in recognising God's relationship with the Bible; the exploration of the extent to which sexuality and gender may influence God concepts; and the recognition of the role people play in evaluating their understandings of God in Christianity. Arranged in a rhythmical structure throughout, every chapter is first prefaced by a media-based report which contextualises relevant themes in a contemporary idiom, and is later concluded by a deconstructive postscript that, in fragmentary ways, invokes some critical concepts in the work of Jacques Derrida germane to the particular questions of God pursued in each. Consecutively, they are named 'Impossibly Indecent Inquiries: God, Gender and Justice' in chapter 1, 'Troubling Texts: Critically Contextual Bible Studies' in chapter 2, 'Performance Anxieties: Identity Politics for Divinities' in chapter 3, and, lastly, 'Storytelling Spaces: Treading upon the Church's God' in chapter 4, within a thesis entitled: **'An Impossibly Indecent God? Pursuing Questions of the Biblical God in the Church of Scotland through Churchgoers' and Marcella Althaus-Reid's Theological Ideas, Juxtaposed with Fragments of Jacques Derrida's Philosophy'**.

But, before reaching the chapters themselves, this 'Introduction' section helps to further contextualise elements covered within the thesis. In respect of this process, the first three parts (*ii.-iv.)* launch preliminary ideas of Marcella Althaus-Reid's indecency and Jacques Derrida's impossibility, while the next two (*v.-vi.*) help to ask some particular questions in relation to how it might proceed in reference to theology and philosophy, Bible and God. Lastly, while 'Positions' and 'Procedures' (*vii.-viii.*) offer a strong insight into the sociological nature of the research undertaken through this study, 'Chapter Cartographies' (*ix.)* contextualises the inquiring found present within it overall and concludes this introductory section with a preliminary summary of what chapters 1-4 will be focusing on.

ii.

Marcella and Jacques

An 'and' is a curious little thing. At its most minimal, it's merely a mark of spacing, punctuation, respiration …
Yvonne Sherwood (2005: 261)

Marcella and Jacques: stark, bold and missing their surnames. An act of transgression (for the academy has rules that repel informal name-calling), but transgression is an unconventional cloak that both Jacques and Marcella have in the past worn well. In trespassing on conventions, trampling down expectations of what might have been expected, they both, when still living, provided a jolt to the way things were, enacting an irruption of the way things could be. They asked questions, the kind that linger in the shadows of words that haunt.

The questions they asked were not the same ones though, and both Marcella Althaus-Reid (with her indecency theories) and Jacques Derrida (with his impossibility themes) are strangers sharing a bench that their lives never knew with just the company of an 'and' between them.[1] While the familiar simplicity of the conjunction misrepresents their differences, the 'and' sutures Marcella and Jacques together for a reason in the interdisciplinary purpose of this thesis, woven as they are into its argument with threads neither tightly held nor closely sewn but present throughout, keeping its agenda together. As Roland Barthes once said, "interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new subject that belongs to no-one" (as cited in Sherwood, 2000a: 1). More about who they are and how they feature will shortly be discussed.

In his book, *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida wrote an important statement about the value of inheritance. "Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task," he said: "it remains before us, as incontestably as the fact that, before even wanting it, or refusing it, we are inheritors, and inheritors in mourning, like all inheritors …" (Derrida, 1994: 39). Inheritance carries this curious quality of lacking a summons despite presenting a

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[1] Derrida himself was very aware of the politics of the 'and', saying, for instance, "a conjunction such as 'and' dares to defy order, taxonomy, classificatory logic, no matter how it works: by analogy, distinction or opposition" (Derrida, 1992 [1989]: 3). Furthermore, the idea of the 'and' is itself critical to the deconstructive process: "But is what we call deconstruction not above all a taking account of forces of dissociation, dislocation, unbinding, forces, in a word, of difference and heterogeneity, such that a certain 'and' itself can translate them?" (Derrida, 2000: 291, cited in Sherwood, 2005: 261).

challenge, eliding recognition while irrationally present, as a given and a task eagerly questioning that which is yet unasked. Can theology even be considered an inheritor of the tasks presented by Derrida and Marcella, or has it just been spooked by their questions?

If, according to Derrida, "to inherit is to select, to sift, to harness, to reclaim, to reactivate … and then to strike out with choices which not only inherit their own norms, but invent them too …" (Derrida, 2006 [1993]: 548-549) then it is the choice of the questions of Marcella and Jacques, the task of *this* inheritance, that is the point of invention in what follows. "Every text is heterogeneous," Derrida has stated, further explaining that "the heritage, too, is a 'text'" (Derrida, 2004: 8). Marcella, commenting on his "politics of memory" in an early essay, summarised how Derrida had:

> … said that to talk about the ghosts of the future is to talk about inheritance and generations; that there are 'certain others who are not present' of whom we must talk 'in the name of Justice' (1995: 153, citing Derrida, 1994: *xix*).

Marcella and Jacques are now those no longer present of whose inheritance we might remember in the name of pursuing justice, and perhaps the ghostly evocations of impossibilities therein. But as Derrida had already made plain at several junctures, the inheritance, the heritage, the archives of the past must always be read forwards to what is yet to come: "It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (Derrida, 1996: 36).[2] Only in the questions of futural possibilities can we more fully make sense of the heritage lying around us; and also of the legacies of Marcella and Jacques.

In the forthcoming chapters, they are brought into dialogue with questions of another kind – those which have been asked in the context of a practical research project undertaken in Edinburgh churches. This sociological element is central to the argument being made, and will soon be introduced below. "I contend it is in the questions," writes cultural theorist Mieke Bal, and "not in the texts as hard core, that we must understand the texts that traditions have managed to save for us" (Bal, 2008: 4).

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[2] In a clear concise statement about the politics of memory and inheritance, Derrida conveyed his insistence on valuing inheritance so highly, saying that it is "because it is often through memory, through the endless and groundless return to the past that we are faced with the most unpredictable future. The most unpredictable future may be hidden in a past which has not yet been re-presented or made present or remembered" (Derrida, in Patton and Smith, 2002: 72).

She continues: "Yet our questions are, in turn, culturally framed, embedded in ways of thinking and common concepts of social life" (Bal, 2008: 4).[3]

To consider themes beyond personal closed universes involves looking to others, weighing up what they think, learning from the strangeness we could all hide from. My choice of asking many people in Edinburgh churches questions integral to this thesis was intended to expand the possible frames from which my thinking on this topic could be done. As Heather Walton has suggested, interdisciplinary research such as this is able to carry within it the potential possibilities of "new and creative leaps forward" (Walton, 2007: 22).[4] It is in the amalgam of bringing various positions, many voices, and alternative theories together that I think through the questions I have about Christianity's biblical God. I consider it a difficult and fragile but entirely necessary endeavour. "Even those concepts that are tenuously established," Bal writes:

> … suspended between questioning and certainty, hovering between ordinary word and theoretical tool, constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential *intersubjectivity*. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don't (Bal, 2002: 11).

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[3] Here Bal is referring, specifically, to biblical texts, but a wider analogy is possible in respect of the points she is making.

[4] Admittedly, Walton's comments on what she calls the "liminal field of interdisciplinary study, … often characterized as a libratory zone of dynamic scholarship" are particularly insightful to bear in mind for she is "uneasy" at the field's proclivity for unwarranted optimism. Instead, she calls for a hermeneutics of suspicion to address her expectation that "fields of interdisciplinary study [are] crossed by the same power lines that run just below the surface of all academic endeavours" (Walton, 2007: 18).

iii.
Impossible Jacques

Deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all;
it does not settle for methodological procedures,
it opens up a passageway, it marches
ahead and makes a trail …
Jacques Derrida (2007 [1984]: 23)

Jacques Derrida, whose death in 2004 prompted a promulgation of epitaphs of remembrance, articles mourning a silenced voice, and a renewed vigour for introductory summary-style textbooks – books which tried to, but often admitted to never fully being equipped to, understand what his project was all about.[5] This project – over-generalized as 'deconstruction' – was already happening before him, is still happening without him, and even if unnoticed, neither invoked nor desired, it is here, there and everywhere because it cannot be anything else.[6] This, for Derrida, was the meaning of the term. "Deconstruction is a phenomenon," Yvonne Sherwood explains in conveying what he meant, "that theoretically takes place independently of any reader: the reader does not creatively produce a textual counter-meaning but rather 'discovers' the contradictions that have already been produced within the language of the text" (Sherwood, 1996: 168).[7]

Deconstruction is going nowhere, and from it there is no escape; its possibilities, once realized, can't be put to sleep like the slumbering giant of fairytales. "In Derrida's reworking," writes Gayatri Spivak, appropriately, in her translator's preface to his first

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[5] As Kevin Hart underlines, Derrida's deconstructive work has "been endlessly quoted out of context, grafted onto various critical and political projects, become the butt of parodies, and been pronounced in so many tones, from contempt to reverence" (Hart, 2000: *xxxiii*); and Derrida himself was often unfairly stereotyped, as Christopher Norris has noted, in a way that labelled him "a rather zany, maverick, 'literary' thinker" not much interested in serious, important things (Norris, 2003: 83).

[6] It is nonetheless worth remembering that Derrida did not intend 'deconstruction' to become something of a meta-label for everything he thought and did. The fame of this concept latched onto him as an inadvertent consequence of some early ideas he conveyed, rather than emerging as the result of any planned ideological framework (*cf.* McCance, 2009: 23)

[7] While Sherwood's example ably captures the lack of agency involved in the deconstructive process, some remain keen to attach action, power and force to the idea. For instance, K. Malcolm Richards has summarised how in "finding the point an entire system depends upon and tagging it," it is then possibly it "leav[es] a mark indicating where the structure will come apart if you try hard enough" (Richards, 2008: 85). From my perspective, imagining the breaking-point of deconstruction in terms of effort expended is a misguided premise that undermines the critical aspect of its ubiquitous 'already happening' nature.

major book on deconstruction – *Of Grammatology* – and its forever fluid disseminatory potential, "… the text has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end. Each end of reading the 'text' is a preface to the next" (Spivak in Derrida 1976: *xii*).[8] Any attempt at static inertia with texts is via deconstruction forever usurped.

Deconstruction is a sticky label not unlike the post-age stamp Stephen Moore once applied to the postmodern, poststructuralist influences invading interesting areas of theology and literary theory at the time (Moore, 1989: 543 *ff*.).[9] Like much post-age rhetoric, deconstruction's complex and at times confusing status has collided with an entire spectrum of views on its perceived worth – from opprobrium right through to reverence (although some might now say that both deconstruction and post-age terms are now a bit jaded anyway, a little passé).[10] A real difficulty over the years, for theologians with an inclination for deconstructive possibilities, was squaring up Derrida's claim to "rightly pass for an atheist" with theological premises straining against the antonymic polarity that this presented (although many have managed to do so very well over the years).[11] Playfully, Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood in a recent article pick up on the fact that more recently, during years when "Theory, Bible,

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[8] Also in her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Spivak has, importantly, commented on the un-endlessness capacity of deconstructive readings to never reach finality, capturing a sense of the permanent commitment deconstructive readings leave open: "To fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom" (Spivak in Derrida, 1967: *ixxvii)*.

[9] Nonetheless, as Yvonne Sherwood has mentioned, "Derrida is not that easily conscripted into this things called postmodernism … [and he] problematizes some of the truisms trotted out in the name of postmodernism" (Sherwood in Adam, 2000: 72). As Kevin Hart explains further, Derrida "repudiates the label 'postmodernist'" insofar as it "marks a historical division between a modern and a postmodern era, and quite rightly he doesn't credit that sort of rupture" (Hart, 2004: 13).

[10] However, as Penelope Deutscher has astutely observed, those who are declaring the 'post-age' of theory passé are the people who were always disinterested in it in the first place, "pleased at the confirmation that there was never much there to worry about, and that it would eventually all go away" (Deutscher, 1997: 34).

[11] Most notable, John D. Caputo is perhaps best known for presenting over many years a strong creative alliance between Derrida and theology (for instance, 1997a; 1997b; 2007). There are, however, many others now adding to the genre. Regardless of the extent to which Derrida's atheism/theism spectrum might run, his interest in reading biblical texts is clear. Humorously conveying her write-up of "Derrida's Bible," Yvonne Sherwood has provided some tangential details in capturing how it "seems to be something of a mongrel, cut and paste edition, which sits uncomfortably alongside too-easy terms like 'International' or 'Standard', as surely as it questions terms like 'New' and 'Revised'" (Sherwood, 2004: 5). Derrida's Bible is, she says, "perhaps rather surprisingly, a fundamentalist's, literalist's Bible for, against all the stereotypes, Derrida is something of a literalist and even a materialist" (Sherwood, 2004: 2).

and religion began to try out some new steps," Derrida explored something of a shift in attention towards things religious, explaining that:

> Derrida led the dance, as much as anybody, and at an age when he might have been content to sit it out. During the last decade or so of his life, Derrida's previously muted interest in religion, including biblical religion, intensified and took several new turns (Moore and Sherwood, 2010b: 220).

Derrida's work is written out of a conviction for impossibilities, searching potential beyond the limits of expectation, and for all that is left after possibility has been realised. Irrespective of what Derrida, himself, thought of religion, his theorising of the impossible has such a lot to offer theology.

Impossibility, a positively affirmative term, has a critical place in this thesis and it will be detailed further in the section below, 'Chapter Cartographies'.[12] It is an idea that reappears throughout the argument as a whole in exploring the title question – An Impossibly Indecent God? – and impossibility itself, as a concept, plays a central role in understanding deconstruction's own complexity. Deconstruction's struggle for meaning is captured by Nicholas Royle in his dictionary-style summary of the ambiguity the word can convey:

> Deconstruction: *n.* not what you think: the experience of the impossible: what remains to be thought: a logic of destabilization always already on the move in 'things themselves': what makes every identity at one with itself and different from itself: a logic of spectrality: a theoretical and practical parasitism or virology: what is happening today in what we call society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality and so on: the question of the future itself (Royle, 2000b: 11).

"The question of the future itself" – a Derridean phrase used by Royle in rounding off his synopsis – is integrally linked to the theme of impossibility, impossibility being itself deeply futural in orientation (Derrida in Royle, 2000a: 200).

A positive focus on the affirmative future marks a recurring theme in this thesis, and in deconstruction itself. Derrida himself said that deconstruction is "affirmative rather than questioning; this affirmation goes *through* some radical questioning, but it is not questioning in the final analysis" (Derrida, 1987 [1986]: 20) and in this sense, a

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[12] Deconstruction has regularly, over the years, been rebuffed as negative and destructive, and often too easily rejected by those who have failed to read it closely enough to discern its deeply positive strands. But as John Caputo has said, "this misbegotten notion that deconstruction is some kind of random intellectual violence, a merely destructive and negative assault on anything still standing, arises from a failure to see what deconstruction *affirms* … [*i.e.*] something affirmatively *un*-deconstructible" (Caputo, 1997b: 128).

similar process of radical questioning through to positively affirmative impossibilities is what is aimed for here. This does not involve a process of using deconstruction as a method, for it cannot be applied in such a way: instead, it is necessary "to perform something new, in your own language … to invent the impossible …" (as cited in Hall, 1979: 62).[13] In the end, the questioning that conventional Christianity might be subjected to in reaching a conclusion is not something that Derrida would consider as a negative attack. On the contrary, as he once said of deconstruction: "I have the secret hope that it affects this tradition not betraying it or simply deforming it but affecting it in a new and unexpected way" (Derrida, 2005: 32).

[13] At several junctures, Derrida explicitly expressed his wariness of too easily categorising deconstruction as a method, a term he felt was both unsuitable for and incapable of conveying his sense of what 'deconstruction' really means: "Deconstruction is not a method or some tool that you apply to something from the outside," explaining the reason for this being because "deconstruction is something which happens and which happens inside" and so the word is unfitting (Derrida in Caputo, 1997b: 9). However, albeit far removed from any such analytical programmatic technique system that the word 'method' might conventionally convey, he remained keen to underline that "this does not mean that we should simply abandon ourselves to the text, or represent and repeat it in a purely passive manner," for it is important to "remain faithful, even if it implies a certain violence, to the injunctions of the text" – and as such, "in this sense, deconstruction is not a method" (Derrida, 2004d [1981]: 155).

iv.

Indecent Marcella

What I thought impossible, indecent,
and unjustifiable, what long ago and
more or less secretly and resolutely I had
promised myself never to do …
was to write following the death
Jacques Derrida (1981: 49)

Hélène Cixous once wrote of Jacques Derrida, "No one has performed more learned yet more innocent pirouettes around words … He makes writing laugh …" (Cixous, 2004: *ix*). While Marcella might not have had a French feminist spin-doctor providing the analysis, she could also be said to be a writer whose "innocent pirouettes around words" could bring laughter to writing, as well as an eccentric inventiveness to theology, wild inclusion to Christianity and radical ex-centricity to its God. As her friend, R. S. Sugitharajah, mentioned in a tribute to her after her death, Marcella was "one of the few theologians who had her own cult following," such was her captivating appeal (Sugitharajah, 2009: *xviii*).[14] He continues:

> Among the current crop of theologians, she was one of the most original and daring. It was she who audaciously asked how theology would look if Argentinian women did their theology without underwear (Sugitharajah, 2009: *xviii*).

Marcella's originality is principally located in how she used the concept of 'indecency' in her dealings with theology. Officially, the OED defines that which is 'indecent' as something "unbecoming; highly unsuitable or inappropriate (†to); contrary to the fitness of things; in extremely bad taste; unseemly" and, in many ways, Marcella's 'Indecent

[14] Marcella's first monograph, *Indecent Theology* (2000a), which Sugitharajah calls a "theological phenomenon," swiftly launched her appearance with great force, almost as "a kind of meteorite on the theological horizon, causing an enormous explosion of energy, curiosity and excitement" (Sugitharajah, 2009: 106). As an illustration of the breakthrough Marcella made with this publication, it is important to mention the American Academy of Religion (AAR) panel held in 2002 to engage with this text, and an account of which was later made available in a series of essays in the journal 'Feminist Theology' in 2003. A key contributor there, Mary Hunt, has recently gone as far as to say that "not since Mary Daly wrote *Beyond God the Father* has a feminist theologian shaped the field so definitively" (Hunt, 2010: 28 referring to Daly, 1973; *cf.* also Daly, 1985 [1968]). Nonetheless, Marcella's appeal was not entirely universal, even in feminist circles, an example of which might be Tina Beattie's biting critique of her "flamboyant rhetoric and flashy style" that apparently covers scholarly "inadequacy" with "meaningless jargon" in a "cavalier attitude" of a "poorly-written ... anti-Christian diatribe" (Beattie, 2007: 469-471).

Theology' could also be said to be all such things to the official systematic standards of normative, acceptable theology.[15]

"All theology is sexual theology," writes Marcella at the start of her breakthrough book, *Indecent Theology* , 2000, and "Indecent Theology," she continues, "is sexier than most" (2000a: *i*).[16] Jeremy Carrette, with respect to her "flirtatious" writing style and its "sensual delights" believes that this itself is integral to what Indecent Theology can claim to be: "for the style of writing," Carrette has said, "is a key part of the decency/indecency of theology" (Carrette, 2001: 288).

As a theological style, Indecent Theology occupies a funky niche of frank analysis with its "out-of-the-closet style of doing theology" (2000a: *i*), designed as it is to fracture the porcelain edges of the precious things of proper theology.[17] Marcella's own definition of Indecent Theology, with its air of vocational propheticism, reads as follows:

> *Indecent Theology* is based on the sexual experiences of the poor, using economic and political analysis while unveiling the sexual ideology of systematic theology. Theology is a sexual act and Indecent Theologians are called to be sexual performers of a committed praxis of social justice and transformation of the structures of economic and sexual oppression in their societies (2000a: *i*).

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[15] It is perhaps tangential, but nonetheless important, to make reference to the semantic origins of the conceptual dialectic of Decency/Indecency that was so integral to Indecent Theology and Marcella's thinking. On her original website, Marcella explained this best in saying that Indecent Theology begins with

> … a suspicion on the ideological use of traditional understanding of the category of *Decencia/Indecencia* (Decency/Indecency) in the Latin American cultures, and specifically in Argentina. *Decencia* is a concept that traditionally has limitations of honesty and trustworthiness for men (especially in economic transactions) but for women, it is a different story. *Decencia* for women in this context implies a complex set of regulations of sexuality (as in sexual options), the dealings with transgressions of expected behaviour according to age and civil state, but also a complex web of expectations based on gender perceptions and sexual understandings including codes of dress, mobility and hairstyle
> ("Dr Marcella María Althaus-Reid," 2009).

This represents a tighter, more contextual and localized definition by Marcella of the decency/indecency dialectic than the majority of paraphrases that are offered by others (*i.e.,* Rosemary Radford Ruether's definition, 2010: 255).

[16] I am making a strong distinction throughout between Marcella's monograph *Indecent Theology* (2000) and 'Indecent Theology' as a concept that she drew upon throughout much of her thinking. In *Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (2004), Marcella explicitly linked her first explicit use of the concept to an article published in 1996.

[17] Indecent Theology is fiercely critical of doctrinal orthodoxy for the restrictions it sanctions on theological possibilities, and Systematic Theology is thus a key subject to challenge (*cf.* 2000e: 47).

Marcella's definition is further clarified in a later article she wrote in which she described the "main function" of Indecent Theology being one "to destabilise the decent order, that is, a constructed political, social and sexual order which has been ideologically sacralised, and whose moralising objective is based on the dyadic reflection on a dyadic God" (2002a: 25).[18]

Indecent Theology as a project emerged for Marcella from her Argentinian background, a context in which she saw the merits and failings of Liberation Theology's movement in the country.[19] Liberation Theology's perhaps well-meaning but seriously flawed naivety to critical issues, such as the nexus of feminism, heterosexism and colonialism (even if purposefully focused on the poor), was its undoing. The road the liberationists took to their theological Oz, a place as strongly packed with promise as illusions, was shaken by the mechanics of limited visionary practices; in failing to see difference beyond pre-programmed agendas they followed stray paths and asked the wrong questions. Critically for Marcella, Liberation Theology missed all the sexual stories that allowed her to imagine a potentially different God.

Marcella was a theological storyteller, of the mystic fable rather than fairytale genre. In Edinburgh, she wrote of a time when:

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[18] My reading of Marcella, and her work, places her not simply in relation to (radical) theology, but also one that is focused on Christianity itself, and the Christian God most of all. Others have understood her writing corpus differently, however. For instance, Angela Pears, who incorporated Marcella's ideas in one chapter of her 2004 book, *Feminist Christian Encounters*, determines that Marcella's "concern is with the functioning of theology rather than the possibilities of the Christian religion," suggesting instead that she was understood as less interested in the "reconstruction or reinterpretation of an identifiable tradition or symbol that stands at the heart of Christianity, as the process of opening up spaces through deconstructive indecency" (Pears, 2004: 15). However, perhaps it is because *both* 'the functioning of theology' and 'the possibilities of Christian religion' feature centrally in Marcella's work, and because this is a style of theology that resists a tidy splicing of categories, that Indecent Theology provides an incisive perspective and somewhat unique position.

[19] Nonetheless, Marcella still placed herself firmly within the Liberation Theology milieu, "emphatically affirm[ing] the validity of Liberation Theologies as crucial in processes of social transformation and superior to idealistic North Atlantic theologies," even if this location had to make room for "a continuing process of re-contextualisation, a permanent exercise of serious doubting in theology" (2000a: 5-6). Her "contribution" to Liberation Theology in particular is, as she puts it, "concerned with the end of sexual naivety" (2005c: 5). This positioning is also true of her perceived relationship with Feminist Theology: "Indecent Theology is still Feminist Theology and Liberation Theology, but more marginal and perhaps even more messy" (2004a: 146). In Liberation Theology in particular, she was highly sceptical of its increasingly saleable value as a "designed label" that served ideologies other than the values she herself held, thinking of it as selling out to an "international market producing fashionable goods" instead of political analysis on behalf of the poor (1998c: 8).

> … I was sitting in a rundown café, drinking a cup of tea on a bitter winter morning, when I saw a woman. She was young, dressed in black leather and jeans, with all the delicacy and the beauty of Scottish women manifested in a pale skin and clear blue eyes. I noticed she had two things, not unusual in these cases of morning tea in rundown coffee shops: a child and false eyelashes … We were questioning God in the smoke of the cigarette, as dismembered women (1997: 48).

Like this one, most of Marcella's stories were written to ask questions of God – to shake the idea of a captive God bricked up in the high tower of doctrinal or biblical correctness, and then, with a heroic swoop, to gather up the remains and take the possibilities of God on an adventure. She broke rules in breaking down the problems she saw in God-the-Standard-Version and this manoeuvre of liberating God typifies a central theme in both Indecent Theology and its complementary campaign of attacking claustrophobic "theo/logic" (2002a: 89).[20] Hers is an anarchic, maverick, transgressive style that sweeps the "old ghosts of patriarchal theology" down the drain (2000f: 215).

If transgression "is the hermeneutical key that the excluded use in order to break everyday issues into events of liberation," then "transgressor theologies are indecent ones, literally 'unsuitable for the system', unfit and unbecoming theologies" (1998a: 260, 264). For Marcella, transgression and acts of trespass happen from the margins, are to be found at the margins, along with such worthwhile things as solidarity, creativity and prophetic inclinations. However, a God at the margins isn't quite what Marcella was looking for: "The God at the margins is a tame vision of the marginal God," she explained, "… because the centre nurtures its epistemology" (2001b: 31). It's not about acquiring visitation rights so that 'God' can descend on the margins and make an appearance, now and then, and only just long enough to make the divine presence felt. No, on the contrary, it is more a case of finding a God-alternative through a quest "to rediscover that God is a truly marginal God" (2004a: 146).

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[20] The importance of recognising the central role of the question to understand, challenge and rewrite 'God' in Marcella's work is not always adequately underlined. Jay Emerson Johnson, who talks of this as "the heart of Marcella's theological vocation," has summarised further the impact of the originality of her thinking in this regard:

> Since roughly the 1970s, gay and lesbian theologies have most frequently turned to questions concerning Christology and ethics with the hope of creating a discourse of welcoming inclusion in churches as well as religious touchstones for civil rights. Yet the doctrine of God remained relatively untouched in those endeavours, exposing a serious lacuna, Marcella astutely realized, that could easy replicate the kind of idolatry that made lesbian and gay theologizing necessary in the first place (Johnston, 2010: 156).

The point of the focus on the margins, and its marginal God, is critical to Indecent Theology which is all about revising God possibilities in the "church which has imprisoned God in its own construction of decency" (2009: 15-16). Writing-classes for a radically different God are what this thesis is all about, too. But something significantly different will be explored in the chapters to come, where Marcella's quest for a marginal God is held in tension with the very centrist God squarely located in the Church.[21] For while Marcella has made such statements as "doing theology from the people … is an indecent act" (1998a: 265) and "the everyday lives of people always provide us with a starting point for a process of doing a contextual theology without exclusions" (2000a: 4), the 'people' of her generalisations are very different to the ones found here in this argument.[22] Marcella believes that "there are untouched, seldom-addressed, painful margins in the life of every Christian, which only a marginal God can address" (2001b: 31), but she might have forgotten to ask whether her marginal God is the one people in churches will want to know.

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[21] Something of the unorthodox complexities of Marcella's theological imagination is captured by Lisa Isherwood, who, in writing of this "very complex theologian" describes "a Quaker who carried more than one rosary on her person at all times and, when in London, often visited the British Museum to offer a gift to Bast, the cat goddess of the night; and also regularly attended the Church of Scotland" (Isherwood, 2010: *xv*).

[22] For over 15 years, Marcella was very active in academic theology and, increasingly, her writing style and subject matter became ever more 'academic' – and it was a context she fitted into well, and aimed for progression within. Yet, there are times when Marcella would appear to splice herself from the 'academic theologian' category in a confusing way as if preserving links with a more community-oriented, activist orientation (*i.e.*, 2005c: 3).

v.
Working Things Out

Decisions about how one chooses to use Derrida [and Marcella], who is using Derrida [and Marcella], and with whom you put Derrida [and Marcella] in dialogue will make a difference in how Derrida [and also Marcella] is pronounced
Frank M. Yamada (2004: 130)

Much has been said about the role of questions, and the questioning nature of indecent impossibilities, in introducing Marcella and Jacques and finding them a suitable place at the table. They can pull up a chair because their questions in some way fit into my own questions. This collection of questions in turn becomes the meta-questioning of the entire project. Here, in this thesis, which asks questions about God and the Bible, questions are asked of questioners (theorists, theologians, and churchgoers together) who have things to say about the biblical God and its role in Christianity. It is a quest run under a spirit of inquiry, which, as Mieke Bal stated earlier, is much more about the questions than the answers.

Returning to Bal, her theorising of questioning allows for a further characterisation of the agenda of this present inquiry: it is one driven by 'why?' questions. "We ask questions of the order of 'why?' to understand things whose meanings have shifted and slid from underneath the relatively stable blanket of the text," she says (Bal, 2008: 4). Perhaps what could be said is that the deconstructive nature of the text, any text (though Bal's text here is the biblical one), has a proclivity to 'shift and slide' into a position (perpetually tenuous and itself slithering away), a zone, where questions will be asked of it, questions which are not new or imposed but already wriggling free from within the text itself.

Defining 'text' is a necessary next step, because it is a word which can contrarily connote different things – from strict semantics which allow a text to mean, very specifically, a straightforward page or book of letters in lines, a matter of fact sort of thing, to a widely ambiguous, ambitious and capacious term which allows 'text' to go far beyond words on paper (and reach foreign realms of alternative signifying systems such as photos or paintings, buildings and statues, sounds and so on). Since the latter kind is what I mean by 'text' in how I use it here, such explanation will be expanded a bit more

in an introductory discussion of God and the Bible below.[23] It is within this view of text that I am suggesting that 'God' as a text (in a biblical text, but also in those other cultural ones) functions, and, following Bal's earlier idea, this uncomfortable text-God tosses and turns and falls out of the crumpled blanket of the text (a text both biblical and cultural) in a 'shift-slide' manoeuvre that releases the potential for who and what this 'God' might be.

Where my 'why?' questions in this all lie is not yet fully clear though. "The questions of 'why'," Bal issues in a reminder, "… emerge not from the text but from the cultural frameworks of the interpreter … [and], in other words, it is from within our own conceptions that we wonder and ask why characters do and say what they do" (Bal, 2008: 4-5). The character of concern in my 'why?' questions is the biblical God – a heterosexually male and hegemonically masculine species of God locked into Christianity's Bible.[24] The focus driving my 'why?' questions throughout is one concerned to ask whether this troubling biblical God might represent the limits of who 'God' might be in the mainstream church. More about these issues will be introduced in a little more depth in the chapter outline to follow. In addition, given that readers "have personal baggage to bring to the text as well as the cultural framings of this baggage" (Bal, 2008: 5) in a later section on my methodological approach I will empty some of my perspectives onto the floor to explain my motivation further. This links to one final insight from Bal: "The question of 'Why?' …," she remarks, "is neither 'in' the text nor

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[23] This second form of 'everything as a text' is also the kind Derrida would ascribe to in deconstructive thought, and "'text' for Derrida is such things as *différance*, spacing, relationality, differentiation, deferral, delay" (*i.e.* those element of the critical aspects of deconstruction) within that purview (Deutscher, 2005: 34). Derrida's critical interest in deconstructing texts in this interventionist way is central throughout, beginning with his earliest major book, *Of Grammatology* (*cf.* Derrida, 1976). Extending the meaning of this further, and as Yvonne Sherwood has ably suggested, this can be related to the fact that "Derrida's 'manifesto' is that all texts … inevitably incorporate self-subverting features, because all texts contain forces, or give rise to interpretations, that cannot be tamed into conformity with the author's, or text's intention" (Sherwood, 1996: 150). Derrida's deconstructive work comments on the difference and deferral of *différance*, things like conflicts, ambivalence and inconsistencies in any text. Importantly, though, *différance,* "since it cannot be elevated into a master-word or a master-concept … finds itself enmeshed in the work that pulls it through a chain of other 'concepts,' other 'words,' other textual configurations" (Derrida, 2004a: 38). This is why John Caputo has commented, quite ingeniously, that "closure spells trouble, which is why *différance* cloaks itself in a misspelling" (Caputo, 1997a: 6).

[24] Several theologians have already written about how God – as heterosexually male and hegemonically masculine – might be understood, *i.e.* Stephen Moore (*God's Gym,* 1996 and *God's Beauty Parlor,* 2001) and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (*God's Phallus*, 1994). While they have done so, this thesis combines such questions with both Marcella and Derrida, and most importantly churchgoers through practical research is an original combination.

outside of it, but 'into' it, towards it; it is the reader's relationship to the text" (Bal, 2008: 6).

Setting off with me into the text, towards it, is the unlikely cohort of Marcella's Indecent Theology, Derrida's deconstructive impossibility, and most importantly the voices of the many participants in the Edinburgh Churches Research Project. Together, the questions fuse in the liminal interstitial spaces of members of the collaboration. It is a montage that improves the investigation immensely, for, as Homi Bhabha has helpfully theorised, it is in "the in-between spaces" of joins and tensions that "the connective tissue that constructs the difference" is to be found (Bhabha, 1994: 4). It is perhaps a risky move to bring such variety on board, to thread the 'collective tissue' of sociology, philosophy and theology around the contemporary Church, and not just at the tidy level of subject matter either. By this it could be said that, even though there are various philosophical theologians similarly interested in the Church and churchgoing contexts, they skirt its edges from their academic positionality rather than walking straight in. A book like James K. A. Smith's *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church* (Smith, 2006) illustrates the problem, because in it, despite its subtitle, there is very little 'going to church' going on: "How should concrete, in-the-pew and on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism?" ask Smith, but seemingly without sitting in the pews himself (Smith, 2006: 10). A crucial difference lies in the division between theorising about church contexts from critical academic positions and actually 'going to church,' listening to churchgoers rather than making decisions about them and what they might think. It is in choosing the second move that this project achieves its originality.[25]

It has already been mentioned that the conceptual leaps of impossibility and indecency offer a strategic heuristic for the investigation from beginning to end. Because of its scope, the project is one of necessary limits. For instance, Derrida and Marcella are involved at a pragmatic and fragmentary level as illustrators and conceptual theorists, only utilising their work involves gathering word scraps and felting them together. This is not a place where either of their thinking will fit a fully developed summary

[25] I am not overlooking the fact that there are several very good congregational studies (such as Dowie, 2002; Hopewell, 1987; Ammerman, 1998; Clark-King, 2004; Porter, 2004). On the contrary, I am illustrating the different nature of the project I have envisioned from the more standardised sociological orientation of the aforementioned congregational studies, which tend not to create a dialogue between theorists such as Derrida and Marcella.

taxonomy, a place where the entire remit of their work might be squashed into in any thorough, conclusive or extensive manner; on the contrary, this is a thesis which integrates chosen elements of the theoretical thought of Marcella and Derrida for analytic reasons that must overlook a lot of what both have said in order to focus on those themes critical to the agenda herein. So, there is no looking over the shoulders back to key figures of importance for Derrida, and there is only a cursory glance at the philosophical interlocutors Marcella spars with in her work; but it is the elision of these that create a purposive strategy leading to how this argument works.

Marcella and Derrida feature differently in the four chapters to come even though both have a place in each (as their different roles will be outlined in greater depth later in this introductory section, 'Chapter Cartographies,' (p. 59, *ff.*). To provide a preliminary insight at this stage, however, it is helpful to mention that, in each of the chapters to come, elements of Marcella's 'Indecent Theology' dialogues with discourse fragments identified from the transcripts of the research project. The tensions that emerge from this process are integrated with Derrida's deconstructive ideas later in each of the chapters by providing a concluding theoretical illustrative response and challenge for the themes the earlier discourse involving Marcella and churchgoers has raised.

This project, as a whole, offers an original contribution to existing work in the areas of deconstructive theologies, with part of this originality beginning with the chasm between such theological approaches and the situation of the Church – and, in many respects, it is a thesis *about* this gap, as well as being a voice situated in it. In this it could be said to be a research topic which, in some way, sets out to test the impossible; this is what makes it most interesting for me. It begins with tensions between theorists and ideas, perspectives and people, because arguments scaffold from sites of quandary can lead to unforeseen vantage points.

vi.
Christian God

By definition, God has to be identified in superlatives …
The logic in all of this is clear enough
Richard Holloway (2008: 97)

In an important essay entitled 'God and Language' feminist philosopher Beverley Clack begins with an insight that is worth quoting in full:

> When God is spoken of within academic theology, there is a tendency to assume that any participant in the discourse of the subject will know what is meant by that word 'God'. Philosophers of religion, as participants in that part of the subject which aims to conceptualize God, have attempted to describe God in definitive terms. According to Richard Swinburne, God is 'something like a "person without a body (*i.e.* a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe"' As such, it is often assumed that the language used for God refers to a divine being (Clack, 1996: 148; citing Swinburne, 1977: 1).

So far, so good. The 'God' that is already such a confused and conflicted term of the introductory pages – Marcella's God-of-the-margins versus her indecent marginalised-God – has become a God Standard hoisted high into view by Swinburne (via Clack, *en route*), and now God-the-Divine-Being seems tidy enough to be defined. It is worth recapping on these descriptors, and perhaps even adding a few more attributes of our own: God is a transcendent disembodied spiritual being; an eternal omniscient omnipotent omnipresent God; all-knowing and all-wise and all-loving (because being perfectly good all these things are true *ipso facto*); is to be worshipped, adored and honoured; is close and personal, yet unreachable; is known and yet unknowable; has created, still sustains, and on top of all this generously relates to us; is entirely just, holy, righteous and merciful; is always greater and of a superlative nature; and, finally, there are the confetti concepts, pretty and colourful ones normally thrown at the feet of Jesus to add to an aura of God's goodness – phrases like 'wonderful saviour' and 'glorious lord' and so on.

With a tick-list now spilling over its own edges, it would perhaps be sensible to attach a tag to this God, to avoid losing some bits of his/her/its vital ingredients. But, already it would seem, God's definition is a bit holey because Swinburne forgot to list a

gender category. Fortunately, Clack is more astute in that regard, because – and remembering in particular the divine-beingness of God - she continues:

> Understanding theological language in this way can lead to debates concerning the propriety – or otherwise – of using male or female pronouns or imagery for God. If the word 'God' is understood as a name for a particular being, the question of whether we should refer to God as 'him' or 'her', 'he' or 'she' seems important (Clack, 1996: 148).

I could not agree with her statement more. The argument running through this entire thesis is alert to the necessity of seeing God's gender, demanding that such positions as those of Swinburne described above are not hidden under clever varnish which smoothes such difficulties out.

And then it took me a few minutes until I worked out what was happening, because Clack's next move sounded a death knell: "This paper," she started,

> ... will not be concerned with whether God is a 'he' or a 'she'! Indeed, I intend to question the assumption that religious language refers to a divine being. If I am successful, the question of which gender may be properly ascribed to the word 'God' is irrelevant (Clack, 1996: 148).

On reading that, there was a sudden clash of entire philosophies before realising they remained companions but that our Gods (or more correctly God concepts) were the ones colliding. For while Clack's theorising plotted to get her to a position where gender is considered irrelevant to a very different kind of God to the "divine being" of Christian convention that Swinburne knew so well (and she takes a thealogical route in the end to get there),[26] my conviction of the vital necessity of a gendered God is anchored to the God of the Church (and the Church of Scotland in particular). The chasm between both forms of God seems unbreachable because Clack's God doesn't go to Church.

The differences between academic options versus Christian concepts in terms of the meaning-potential of the biblical God (and, relatedly, God's Bible for both are inseparable) is a central theme in what is to follow; this juncture then provides a good opportunity to summarise the kind of God that features here. It has already been

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[26] In summary, the outline agenda of Clack's paper begins with her intention "to explore the claim that language used of God, rather than referring to a divine being, in fact reflects human ideals and values," as mentioned above, which then leads to a position where "the concept of God can be shown to reflect masculinist values and interests," before pursuing alternative ways of looking at things under the rubric that, "in order for God to be God, God must, at the very least, represent our highest hopes and deepest values" (*cf.* Clack, 1996: 148-149ff.; and also see Clack, 2000 for an article similarly reflecting on such issues).

established, in terms of the earlier attributes display, that the God of this thesis (*i.e.* the mainstream Christian God) is a Swinburne style standard version. The Church's God, steeped as he is in various creeds and ancient councils, has always been a very biblical God, (variously named right enough),[27] and never more so than in the Church of Scotland.

For instance, the Church of Scotland version of the Church's God is more biblical than, say, that Roman Catholic one which has the edges of the authority of tradition to make for a more ambivalent creation. The legacy of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland has loomed large for several centuries, more especially so given that here it "was among the most radical and thorough-going of the Calvinist reformations in Europe" (Forrester, 2009: 7), bringing with it not just the standard orthodoxies (from Nicaea, Chalcedon, Constantinople, *etc.*) but also Calvinist fervour, the figure of Knox, and a very large, stable place for a very determined and dominant Bible. The reformers formulated an ideology of *sola scriptura,* the Scripture Principle, which is "where the elevation of the Bible begins" (Thatcher, 2008:114). This elevated Bible was designed to be an open and accessible Bible, in the hands of everyone who was not a member of the echelons of ecclesial authority.[28] It is in this Bible alone – contained and constrained within it – that the Church of Scotland's God is principally supposed to be found.[29] Furthermore, if Calvin, who "regarded the Bible in its entirety as divinely inspired, a unique book in which every word was equally dictated by the Holy Spirit" (Thomassen, 2010: 26), is to be followed, this God purposively wrote himself into his biblical depiction all on his own as well.[30]

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27 The list could begin something like this: Yahweh/YHWH, Jehovah, Adonia, I Am, Father of Jesus, Abba, Jesus himself, Spirit, Lord, Ruach, and so on.

28 This was the theory anyway, even if in practice it was perhaps less so – for, as Yvonne Sherwood and Stephen Moore have mentioned, there was evidently some discordance between "the Reformation ideal" and the fact that "in practice, unmediated communion proved deeply problematic" (Sherwood and Moore, 2010a: 18, footnote). For instance, ideological rules of 'correct interpretation' of the Bible as an open book became an issue, curbing the freedom of each person to interpret the scriptures independently. Another clash between fantasy and reality in understanding, retrospectively, Reformed Protestant politics is detailed by Peter Marshall who has explained that while "Protestant mythology has the reformers 'discovering' the bible, as if it had lain mouldering and forgotten at the back of a cupboard" in reality Medieval Christianity had already been "in fact intensely, voraciously biblical"(Marshall, 2009: 49-50).

29 As an aside, it is worth mentioning that in Scottish Protestantism God is never really *in* the communion and wine, yet, is perhaps always assumed to be *in* the text as the Word.

30 The Scripture Principle naturally allies itself with a hermeneutical orientation towards literalism. Adrian Thatcher describes the mechanics of this understanding, explaining how "if everything is to be decided on the basis of what [the Bible] appears to say, it must say it,

It could nonetheless be said that this God who wrote himself into and out of the Bible according to reformist ideology, did not do so with inadequate clarity however. The tricky issue of the Trinity (so far overlooked) requires a mention for it languishes within the word 'God' in a multiple unity defying comprehension, a threat to its own intertext. A different category entirely is needed for the Trinity which, while looking very biblical at first glance, is perhaps on closer analysis only tangentially so. To adopt a description from Catherine Keller, "Christian God-language had early resisted its own monism by breaking into three known as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the three 'persons' of the Godhead" (Keller, 1998: 227).[31] The Trinity, which Julia Kristeva has described as the "crown jewel of theological sophistication" (Kristeva, 1987: 43), is, in the end a "postbiblical abstraction," to use another phrase of Keller's (Keller, 1998: 227).[32] In other words, if the biblical God is at all Trinitarian it is due far more to the creativity of trialectical production teams in early Church councils than to a nascent fully fledged concept emanating from the texts themselves.[33]

The fact that retrospective redaction can and has taken place in giving God (including the fiercely partisan, definitively monotheistic character who lurks quite persistently around the majority of Hebrew scriptures) a Trinitarian identity reveals

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say it plainly… Despite the obvious fact that many of the words, ideas and literary forms are metaphorical or symbolic, and often intentionally ambiguous in their very suggestiveness, the Bible is to be understood, wherever possible, literally" (Thatcher, 2008: 118). Meanwhile, as an example of further elaboration of this point, Kevin Hart mentions how, at the Council of Trent, God was declared the author of exactly the correct number of biblical books in an apparently purposive and deterministic fashion (Hart, 2005: 244).

31 Here, Keller is mentioning this in a discussion in which she "add[s] an anthropological spin to each of these three divine 'personae'" by theorising that "what appears as a way of divine being will unmask itself (temporarily, at least) as a mode of human self-construction" (Keller, 1998: 227). An interesting contrast to this is the view of Paul Tillich who asserts that "Trinitarian monotheism is not a matter of the number three. It is a qualitative and not a quantitative characterization of God" (Tillich, 1951: 228).

32 Considering the role of the Church of Scotland in this thesis, an interesting point is made by Collins that "the issue of the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity emerged in sharp focus at the time of the Reformation and was compounded by the rationalism of the Enlightenment period," whereby "the perception that the concept of the Trinity is merely speculative, and possibly a distraction, has shaped the landscape of theological discourse in the West for the past four centuries at least" (Collins 2008: 2). However, it is true that, in the last few decades, the Trinity would appear to have gained status and value in various theological and ecclesiological contexts.

33 The mechanisms of Trinitarian emergence are fascinating and incredibly creative in their own right, all the more so given the lack of biblical input or evidence. Adrian Hastings puts it well in noting the "development into a father who now had a son, a son who now had a monotheistic God as father, an enigma in history and a spiritual communion so strongly imagined that the spirit evolved to make the partnership Trinitarian" (Hastings, 2000: 270).

much about the force of Christian ideological politics in successfully making it work in the face of biblical ambiguity and divine obscurity. So, while the Church of Scotland's God might be considered to be the one of its official emblem – *i.e.* its burning bush logo – this God is in fact a more defined concept than the obscure one Moses encountered speaking to him all those years ago in the flames of Mt. Sinai (and, indeed, it could also be suggested that the Church's God is more defined than in any single biblical-God-picture). The Church of Scotland has a God of Trinitarian details, doctrinal restrictions and denominational affiliations – in other words, he exists as a collaboration to powerful effect.

It is in the midst of considering the development in God's conceptualisation, however, that it is important to still remain close on the heels of the Bible's God, not letting him run to the hills of confusion. Christianity – despite any Trinitarian mysteries and "wild and empty conceptual acrobatics" (Rahner, 1970: 48) – must somehow find its way back to the God of Jesus. For, as Adrian Hasting has wisely pointed out, what needs to be remembered is that Jesus:

> … wholly accepted the Jewish understanding of God as revealed in the Hebrew scriptures: God the creator in Genesis, the chooser of Abraham, the liberator of Israel from Egypt, the God whose justice and love were proclaimed by the prophets, the God who was prayed to in the psalms, the Temple and synagogues. A Christian doctrine of God can only begin with this profound continuity … What most absolutely holds the two covenants together is precisely God (Hastings, 2000: 269).

It is this sense of "profound continuity" and of canonical-style holding together that gives the God of Christianity - a God who is ultimately singular though variant in constitution, a God whose identity is felted together by different biblical and extra-biblical ideas, a God whose triune "inner life" (Collins, 2008: 2) allows a Big Brother style sneak preview into divine domestic affairs – an additional veneer of ideology to his being. In this sense, it is a canonized God who is accepted and authorized, venerated and valued due to the mechanisms of canon, a procedure of early Christian decision making that never really involved him in the first place anyway.

George Aichele is an astute observer of the politics of the canon in Christian history and the present day: "A canon," he clarifies with simplicity and in a generic way, "is a collection or list of authoritative writings, as accepted by some group of readers" (Aichele, 1997: 127). However, while there may be various canons, none is of such importance as the biblical one. The biblical God is without qualification far more than

just "a collection or list of authoritative writings" because these writings are Christianity's Sacred Text. Simply by merit of being in the honourable position of Sacred Text, the biblical canon is inherently and unavoidably linked to God.[34] In a process that appears something like a vicious circle, the biblical canon is correlatively inherently and unavoidably of value to the "group of readers" for whom it functions as a Sacred Text. This thereby re-inscribing its status and worth, and, with that, the God it contains. And so the cycle proceeds. Aichele explains the canonical mechanism well, saying to begin, "the canon of scriptures was created to satisfy the desire for a self-explanatory authoritative text, the 'word of God' … [with] some intrinsic quality that identifies them (and them alone) as the authoritative word of God" (Aichele, 2010: 61).[35] It is because of this, as Aichele continues, that Christian churchgoers believe:

> … the books of the Bible have been imbued with the quality either by God, their spiritual author, through divine inspiration of the historical human writers, or else by the church, which authorized the books by accepting them into the canon, again with the aid of divine inspiration (Aichele, 2010: 61).

Whatever way it is looked up, what is clear is that the decision of authority has already been made.

To put the formation of the biblical canon in context involves returning to the early centuries of nascent Christianity, when, as a young emergent movement, little more than a Jewish sect, issues of definition and identity gathered pace until they eventually achieved a premium place on the early Church's agenda. James Barr has described the process as follows:

> The Bible, the written documents, forms the final precipitate from this long fluid state of tradition … Tradition came before scriptures, and scriptures came before the Bible: for 'the Bible' implies a fixed and closed collection, and this was not reached until a very late stage when a so-called 'canon' of

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[34] Though it could be said that Christianity displays a whole spectrum of possible positions relating to how exactly it might understand what God's relationship with and involvement in the Bible might be. Of his understanding of what a Sacred Text invokes more generally, Robert Detweiler's seven elements are often cited, and these features involve the ideas that it is thought to be divinely inspired (and therefore true); that its purpose is to transmit a message of the divine about the divine; and be necessary to veil its message (since it is too holy for instant clarity); thoughts that it likely requires "decoding" by interpreters; to convey a message which is life-transforming; and to promise the utopian future; and, lastly, to act as "both an evocation of a substitute for divine presence" (Detweiler, 1985: 219-222).

[35] The complex phrase 'Word of God' is itself laden with ambiguous meaning, something that became even clearer to me during discussions with focus group participants and interviewees (*cf.* John, C: 208, for example).

> scripture was drawn up … 'Canon', as the principle of a fixed and closed collection, is very late, long after biblical times (Barr, 1980: 58).

With Barr's helpful summary, it is nonetheless important to interpret things as working at the micro-level, and to bear in mind that, what he has called a process of canon formation that enjoyed a "long fluid state" and remained incomplete until "very late, long after biblical times," the entire process might have been finished at the end of the fourth century by Aichele's estimation (Aichele, 1997: 129) and so, in the wider scheme of things, could more easily be seen as a very swift manoeuvre in early church politics.

However creative Christianity's canon formation might have been, though, a retrospect glance at the whys, whens and wheres are, in this instance, of far less importance than in discovering the 'who' the procedure produced, with that 'who' being Christianity's God. Everything canonical works by the power of the intertext where "the meaning of each book is … strongly determined by its juxtaposition with the other" (Barton, 1998: 152). This produces a very stable singularity, a "narrative completeness" as Aichele might say (Aichele, 2010: 45), out of an originally diverse multiplex. To adopt something from the imagination of Frank Kermode, who has suggested that "canon is not just an opaque wrapping that must be seen through or removed if one is to see its contents" (Kermode, 1989: 191), we might say that God's textual wrapping paper cannot be torn off, scrunched up and left outside with the rubbish – the reason being that 'God' (as noted earlier) is far more of a text-God than a simple, ontologically questionable and epistemologically unreachable, essentially striped-bare and out-there "divine reality" (*i.e.* of Swinburne). There can be no essential 'God' without or beyond the shiny canonical paper, not really.

In some ways, presenting a Giftwrap-God may appear facile, and an irrelevant thing, but perhaps this acts as an important metaphor for the God the argument of the thesis deals with. In a book in which the Bible may be labelled as an *Unsuitable Book,* Hugh Pyper has, for instance, described the text with reference to "the God which it cages and displays" (Pyper, 2005: 8). This is a God wrapped in a Bible that is itself wrapped into a canon and it is to this collaboration as a mutuality that the bow is securely tied.

The politics of canonical procedures begin with a system of exclusions, the rubrics of which revolve around standard definitional binaries – such as good and bad, true and false, worthy and worthless, in and out (with the former in each clearly making

the grade of inclusion). In order to keep the good, true and worthy in place, the ideologies of canonical politics close off the door to the encroaching moves of alternative possibilities. There is something of a tyranny of fixity at work. With decisions made, the key to a closed canon is thrown away as the formation process reaches the redundancy phase.[36] The Bible, a semiotic authoritative and final unity, is thereafter a monologue of diversity constrained to speak with one voice. Again, Aichele captures the sense of this well, in saying that:

> Once the scriptures are transformed into the canon, they become the ideological metatext of the Bible understood as a unified whole. The Bible is understood to transmit a single message with a single meaning: for Christians, all of the biblical books speak clearly together, a single truth (Aichele, 2010: 46).

Consequently, as "a single guidebook with fixed eternal meaning" (Thatcher, 2008: 100), the biblical canon contains a single God with a likewise fixed eternal meaning that in turn keeps the potential for divine deviance, ambiguity or multiplicity away from prying eyes. In other words, a fundamental unity – for, "at the very least, the canonical messages cannot contradict each other" (Aichele, 1997: 132) – strips potential God possibilities as a matter of course. And since God partakes in this monologue of unity, God, too, must commit to the consistency of an essential sameness at all times, too.[37]

If "a canon is more than the texts that make it up" (Aichele, 2001: 4), and a metanarrative, following Lyotard, is more than the collections of stories it contains, then

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[36] This is not to suggest that over the past millennia there were never any acts of defiance vis-à-vis an entirely closed canon, for it is clear there was still some subversive fringe activity going on. This is seen, for instance, in the ambiguities and slippages which resulted in a slightly different biblical canon in different Christian denominations over the centuries. In the face of these very limited variances, Protestant reformers took it upon themselves – bearing the new and shiny armour of their *sola scriptura* – to excise any ambiguity wherever they could since this kind of thing jarred somewhat with their Scripture Principle that involved a Bible written by God.

[37] There is really no room to include a discussion of this here, but, to my mind, one of the most interesting things about the working mechanics of the canonical processes lies in the creative moves necessarily deployed to sustain the canonical ideology of unity and a tight intertext. John Riches summarises the process briefly, suggesting that, "with a collection of sacred texts as diverse as those contained in the Bible this will entail not only devising strategies for accommodating passages whose most evident sense is in flagrant contradiction to the central beliefs of the community; it will also entail setting emphases – highlighting certain texts and relegating others to relative insignificance" (Riches, 2000: 136). The latter idea, which refers to a lectionary style partial hermeneutics manoeuvre, commonly reduces the extent to which 'the Bible' can be said to be part of Christian worship. A 'canon within the canon' move is further responsible for shaving away the more awkward edges of some portrayals of the biblical God – such as instances of a jealous, angry, wrathful and seemingly unjust God.

it could be said that God-the-metanarrative is more than the potential possibilities for God that Christianity could sustain. On a similar trajectory, Yvonne Sherwood has suggested that "a deeply ingrained cultural sense of the Bible as the 'Word of God', or at the very least a homogeneous canon, means that we expect that separate textual voices will be gathered into a single consciousness" (Sherwood, 2000a: 217), and, remembering that, in the Church of Scotland in particular, the 'Word of God' *is* God at his strongest, her words fit very well. Continuing, she says, "this book, of all books, is expected to process life into a gigantic metanarrative, to frame the world in a Great, all-encompassing Code" (Sherwood, 2000a: 217) – a gigantic coded metanarrative that is perhaps never so dangerous than one which so ably contains God.

In summary, it has been noted how powerfully the canonical context meta-stories an equally powerful intertext of God – a God of congealed consistency collected and collated, then stapled together, a unity from diversity or a plural singularity. This God is the Church's God, or, more specifically, the God of the Church of Scotland, a denomination with feet well-planted in biblical authority. God is on text-based terrain in such a locality. Being so highly biblical, and being a belonging of the Church specifically, this is a God that lives in an entirely different paradigm from the God-with-potential of Beverley Clack's possibilities. On the contrary, this is God with a thud, a basic biblical God, largely un-theorised but worshipped instead, a three lettered triumvirate, some ink on a page, the simplest of words yet the most complex of texts.

vii.
Positions

Derrida does not ask us to jettison canons.
He proposes that we keep alive questions of how
canons are formed …
Kevin Hart (2004: 88)

It involves some creativity, if not a minor cognitive leap, to describe a research methodology along the lines of canon formation. In some ways, the metaphor doesn't quite fit at all – for, unlike conventional canons, this project is neither collectively authoritative, communally fixed nor permanently closed. It also appears devoid of that metanarrative quality that canons, especially biblical ones, find so dear. Nonetheless, just as Derrida wished to "keep alive questions of how canons are formed," beginning a research methodology in this way, even if a bit unorthodox, opens up the process of formation of the project in question to review.

Any research project has an emergent and evolving nature, a bit like putting together a Bible (though in a more direct way). Each moves through various stages: from oral culture to written texts; through generating material and then selecting for inclusion; by creating unity from fragments; and also choosing limits for completion to be realised. This one – which involved a Case Study approach and was carried out in Church of Scotland congregations in Edinburgh for this project specifically – has several research methods to its make-up, the various aspects of which will be detailed below.

Methodology is like the canon into which these methods fall. A counter-canonical methodological framework like this one helps to orientate and order the details of an otherwise unwieldy and extensive practical research project. It is, in many ways, a working strategy that helps to explain how the discourse excerpts of the later chapters have come about, and what they might mean. Overall, the study's methodological trajectory involved creating a research project that could generate suitable discursive material to address the dual rubric seen pervading this thesis – the Bible's status and God's gender (which together compound into God's biblical masculinity). Throughout, my focus of inquiry across the chosen research contexts concerned the status, role and function of the Bible (biblical material and material Bible); and the heterosexual masculinity of its God. Centrally, it aimed to investigate

aspects of churchgoers' viewpoints concerning the status of both the Bible and Christianity's God.[38]

Before detailing the methodology further, however, it is worthwhile to advance some points by Laurel Richardson, a qualitative researcher who is interested in the topic of writing up research itself. Out of a concern over the standardisation of sociological research (and perhaps academic projects in general), which has a proclivity at times to become a litany of convention tied to specific patterns of expected investigation and presentation (of the style that anyone in academia may have come across), she petitions the value of a "consider[ation] of alternative forms for writing sociology" (2002: 414). Aware of the consequences and liability of failing to challenge unimaginative standards, she underlines the political ideologies involved in meeting demands of duty: "How we are expected to write affects what we can write about; the form in which we write shapes the content" (Richardson, 2002: 414).

Perhaps Richardson's observations are more appropriate for sociology than for any other discipline, just because qualitative research is precisely about investigating against the norms of expectation, and should in principle be driven more by an exploration of ideas about the unknown rather than starting a collision course with the constraints of what exists. Richardson's declared poststructuralist position on her sociological perspective is the location of her permission to write new things, beginning with:

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[38] It is prescient, before launching into any research project, to first establish that it does not overlap with similar work already done that could be suitably utilised (Silverman, 2005: 72). This overall project, insofar as it involves an originality of juxtaposed approaches mentioned earlier, is also original in terms of the context of its research design and execution as well, representing as it does a new area of investigation in practical theology (as no similarly themed studies on a comparable scale have been carried out in the Scottish context to date, to my knowledge). Additionally, while two significant recent studies outside of Scotland have been undertaken that have centralised the issue of gender in the Church, and the maleness of God – Ellen Clark-King's congregational research in Newcastle (*cf.* Clark-King, 2004), and Fran Porter's in Northern Ireland (*cf.* Porter, 2004) – this research differs from my own, which focuses on a sociological project in the Church of Scotland, while also invoking elements of impossible indecency through Derrida and Marcella. The necessity of a sociological dimension to my overall research is to ensure the perspective of the Church is not simply a taken-for-granted supposition nurtured in an academic location. While my thesis cannot relinquish its academic location and partiality, through practical research I have attempted to provide insights from churchgoers in order to integrate with a wider interpretation of the context studied (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 166).

> … the doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method or theory as universal and gender claim to authoritative knowledge. Truth claims are suspected of making and serving particular interests in local, cultural, and political struggles. Wherever truth is claimed, so is power; the claim to truth is also a claim to power. Once the veil of subjugated truth is lifted, the opportunities for addressing how we write, how we can write, and what we can write about are legion – including the multiple positionalities inherent in alternative representations (Richardson, 2002: 415).

In all academic writing, personal positions are important whether they are recognised and valued or not. In sociological research, it is all the more necessary to explain such points of approach, for, as Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln say, "all research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 22).

Like Richardson, I am beginning from a position of poststructuralism and postmodernism in my ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. As she has already pointed out, there are key themes belonging to such perspectives. Ontologically speaking, describing all that *is* from such a perspective involves denying the place of a single, independently verifiable, externally knowable and monolithic reality; in other words rejecting that there is an 'out there' to be found in which truth can be bundled into containers opened up for analysis. In place of realist accounts, a supremely different approach to the world of language and text is imagined, one of multiple and fragmented discursive frameworks, myriad intercrossing lines of exchange, one in which nothing exists *per se* beyond and beneath this web-like fluid state. As Catherine Belsey has said in capturing a sense of persuasive irony in the different worlds just mentioned, "realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar" (Belsey, 2002: 44). From my perspective then, and left dealing with the question of "whether realities are only what people believe them to be" (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 152), that which is 'discursively familiar' and 'constructed' is, instead, all that can really be said about the ability to know anything at all.

From an ontological perspective such as the one just mentioned comes an epistemology in which all that can be known about all that there might be is similarly discursive in style; one in which knowledge cannot be sought and mined but is instead generated and constructed, and one in which there *is* nothing to be captured in big nets or drilled for in deep soil. Instead, everything lies far closer to a non-realist surface

where there is little observable correspondence between words and things, where meaning is known in the intertexual surface of discursive layers. Interpreting such knowledge is then tentative, contingent and somewhat problematic, always situational, multiple and on-the-move (Atkinson, 1990: 6). Truth is not the capitalised kind, is not "a collection of insights floating about, parts of which are sooner or later revealed or discovered, nor does it lie deep within us, waiting to be freed" (Bleier, 1984: 195) but is instead productive and slippery, with an identity that is inventive. As Sasha Roseneil has hinted at, approaching things in this way by "never claiming to express the 'Truth'" releases a game that "plays with existing possibilities and opens up new ones" (Roseneil, 1999: 177).

Ontological and epistemological perspectives have a significant impact on research methodologies, for the context from which a researcher begins an investigation is critical to understanding how it has been designed to work. In some ways, a situational perspective on ontology and epistemology is also the reason why research is carried out in the first place, starting as it does from an investigative need to search and question rather than assume and decide. In the case of this thesis, conducting research was something I considered necessary in order to avoid peddling assumptions based on my own agenda (and also academic ones more generally) about what people in churches, Christian worshippers in active communities of faith, might think, perceive and believe about the issues central to its agenda.

Throughout, I have used the term 'churchgoers' in describing those involved in the research project. Jeff Astley's 'ordinary theology' project has created something of a standardized term in theological circles for people such as those addressed in a research context like this one (*cf.* Astley, 2002).[39] Ordinary theology is, according to Astley, "the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic and systematic kind. 'Ordinary', in this context, implies non-scholarly and non-academic …" (Astley, 2002: 56).[40] In other words,

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[39] Astley has been writing prolifically about that which he calls "my category of 'ordinary theology'" (2010: 3) for around a decade, and his ideas around it have been referenced and developed fairly widely by others. The North of England Institute for Christian Education (and, as detailed here, by bibliographic references in relation to "NEICE") has also been involved in an entire 'ordinary theology project'. Although Astley claims the term as his own, the idea has probably had wider informal circulation in the past, albeit without the 'ordinary theology' label.

[40] At times, Astley writes specifically (and on the whole) about 'ordinary theology' in decidedly Christian terms, addressing a Church context, but his phrase is a confused one for, at

ordinary theology is that which is learned implicitly through participation in, and belonging to, Christian communities. In further elaboration of this designation, Astley proceeds by saying:

> Ordinary theology is itself often grounded in a less articulate and more inchoate complex of human and religious attitudes, values, commitments, experiences and practices. Some of these elements have been variously classified as a part of 'folk', 'common' or 'implicit religion' – as well as of official or 'conventional' religion; or simply as 'spirituality' or 'human faith' (Astley, 2002: 56).

Aside from sounding somewhat patronising and romantic at times, Astley's 'ordinary theology' is, to my mind, something of a flawed concept, however well-used and popular it has become. This is because, in creating a differential between academic and 'ordinary' theologies on the grounds of theological education alone, ordinary theology inadequately deals with the extent to which exposure to the tools of academic theology will, or will not, change someone's viewpoint, and correlatively, it fails to account for the huge variety of perspectives found within those 'academic theologians' (not to mention the variants that may be in circulation in the 'ordinary theology' category, too, amidst many people with possibly all sorts of alternative critical training in all sorts of other fields).

For the reasons outlined, I am using the basic term 'churchgoers' rather than 'ordinary theologians'. This term allows me to refer to those involved in the research project (all of whom necessarily had, at the time, a church connection in order to be part of the research in the first instance) as a whole and in a general way, while holding within the term a sense of the myriad (unknown) perspectives and theological positions of those to whom it refers.[41]

"We can never," wrote Lesek Kolakowski, "…begin our search from an epistemological point zero, without any presuppositions" (Kolaskowski, 1988: 33). Accompanying everyone involved in research is a "conceptual framework" (Robson,

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other times, it is supposed to represent a context much broader than Christianity; as he has detailed recently, "the category of ordinary theology can be broadened to include non-believers, since most people have *some* beliefs about the existence and nature of God, even if they are agnostic and atheistic" (Astley, 2010: 4). I am not convinced it works as an open and fluid concept like this across such a wide spectrum.

[41] Admittedly, and with the instability of all concepts, 'churchgoers' and 'churchgoing Christians' are terms which are not watertight. For instance, while the people to whom I am referring were part of a church in which research was carried out at the time, they may no longer be – yet they are still for the purposes here termed 'churchgoers'.

2002: 63) of assumptions and presuppositions, beliefs and expectations, and a situated context with a partial viewpoint.[42] All emerge out of a particular worldview, and each adds value and perspective to the research being carried out.[43] As Arundhati Roy once wrote, "There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing" (Roy, 2004 [2002]: 230), and each of these ways of seeing emerge "from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture" as Stuart Hall puts it (Hall, 2003: 94).

However, it is because "a way of seeing is a way of not seeing" (Oakley, 1974: 27) that it is important that research is approached on the 'single story' trajectory rather than as a generally applicable masternarrative. In order to avoid thinking along these lines, to avoid, as Donna Haraway might have put it, "the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1991: 189), it is good research practice to always recognise partiality and "to understand *how* you are using selectivity and perspective, rather than to assume – or to hope – that you are not" (Mason, 2002: 90). In other words, a reflexive orientation to research that incorporates a self-awareness of intentions for and impact on the outcomes, together with an acknowledgement of personal accountability and a commitment to openness is what is required. Ironically, it is the recognition of the limitations of research designs (more especially than their merits) that "encourages a reflexive awareness of the boundaries of our own and others' claims to knowledge and understanding" (Willig, 2001: 151). A flawed research plan can also be a good one.

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[42] This is why the idea of a "standpoint" and a "standpoint epistemology" found in many feminist theories is problematic insofar as it implies a conceptual unity that is something of a fiction, eliding the nuanced difference between different women and what they think. A standpoint assumes a difficult position, somewhat affixed to an understanding of truth, with a standpoint epistemology promoting the idea that a "better truth" is something to be found (*cf.* Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 75; Gray, 2003: 182-183). In contrast, while a standpoint epistemology "reinforces the idea that subjects are themselves unitary selves that indeed have an identity, essence or stability" leaving them open to the exclusionary traps of "dichotomous/binary thought systems," Hammers and Brown argue that a feminist poststructuralist approach allows location to be "a tool not of appropriation but of engagement and deconstruction" (Hammers and Brown, 2004: 93). In this sense, standpoint positions contradict a poststructuralist sense of multiplicity, fluidity, and instable perspectives and identities.

[43] There is, nonetheless, something of a latent "biasphobia" in sociological research, whereby credibility can be considered under threat by those who, instead of valuing grounded perspectives and open admissions, feel that all elements of bias must be eviscerated from worthwhile research as if something to be inoculated against – which is a view that I consider both unsustainable and deeply misguided (*cf.* Morse, 2002: 891).

Part of explaining the partiality and limitations of any methodological approach involves recognising an operative paradigm at work in how the research proceeds. As a critical perspective, not a methodology in itself, Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (henceforth FPDA) is the one I worked from in this research project (*cf.* Baxter, 2003). Originally devised by Judith Baxter, a sociologist with a background in linguistics and a location in an educational context, FPDA began, as she puts it, as a "libertarian impulse to release the words of marginalised or minority speakers in order to achieve the richness and diversity of textual play that only emerges from the expression of different and competing points of view" (Baxter, 2002: 8-9). With an etymology in the wider, well-established fields of Discourse Analysis (and especially the Critical Discourse Analysis subdivision therein), FPDA swims as a "small fish in the big sea of discourse analysis" (Baxter, 2008: 243),[44] offering a supplementary critique to its discourse analytic predecessors, "simultaneously complementing and undermining other methods" (Baxter, 2008: 244), principally in terms of its 'feminist poststructuralist' outlook.

All forms of discourse analysis are naturally discursive in orientation, but 'discourse' is an inscrutable word replete with "rather fluctuating meaning" (Foucault, 1972: 80), and is a thoroughly complex and multivalent term. "Aptly demonstrating the non-fixity of meaning," as Baxter herself says, "the term 'discourse' is itself a highly contested term" (Baxter, 2003: 7). For this reason, before continuing to describe FPDA further – both in terms of Baxter's development of the original paradigm and, correlatively, how it features as a working analytic strategy in this project – a diversion to discourse is imperative.

"Obfuscating" is the word that literary theorist Sara Mills has called the multiple personalities and multivalent possibilities of discourse terminology (Mills, 2004: 1).[45]

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[44] Baxter describes FPDA over and against other discourse analytic methods principally in terms of its move from the tendency towards emancipatory, idealist or materialist research paradigms found in more established forms to her own poststructuralist "transformative quest" (Baxter, 2008: 244). As a contrast, Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland's standard definition of discourse analysis ranging from "the description and interpretation of meaning-making and meaning-understanding in specific situations through to the critical analysis of ideology and access to meaning-systems and discourse networks" (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 6) conveys something of what Baxter is trying to create in bringing feminist poststructuralism into dialogue with the conventional 'emancipatory, idealist or materialist' options that does not entirely represent a poststructualist position.

[45] Mills' overall perspective is poststructuralist, and depends largely on Foucauldian discourse theory. As she makes note of, Foucault has himself expressed the ambiguity he has

Although a term that is "frequently left undefined, as if its usage was simply common knowledge," Mills believes in the necessity of finding a way to grasp elements of this confusion across the many multiple situations in which it is operative (Mills, 2004: 1). "Discourse is omnipresent," declares Jane Sutherland (Sutherland, 2006: 46), and while being everywhere at once, it is also nowhere at all, both particularly understood while commonly known, an enigma of its own.

Taking a stab at a definition in their introduction to *The Discourse Reader*, Adam Jaworksi and Nikolas Coupland write: "Discourse is language in use relative to social, political and cultural formations – it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals' interactions with society" (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999: 3). This is a tidy definition, which, from a poststructuralist deconstructive perspective, finds some problems with conveying the idea of "language in use" and "language reflecting" an external reality. Rectifying this somewhat, discourse theorist Norman Fairclough has underlined that, far more than mirroring and mimicking the social order, discourses are "shaped by relations of power, and invested with ideologies," and that, rather than reflecting all that there is, discourses employ an ability to "construct and constitute them" (Fairclough, 1992: 8, 3).

From a discourse theory perspective, the key difference is the poststructuralist outlook on the meaning of language and text, the difference, as Sara Mills elucidates, between "seeing language as simply expressive, as transparent, as a vehicle of communication, as a form of representation," and seeing it "as a system with its own rules and constraints, and with its own determining effect on the way that individuals think and express themselves" (Mills, 2004: 7). Paraphrasing Derrida's understanding of the ex-centricity of meaning and interpretation, which emerge discursively and not from an external totality as such, Barry Stocker has detailed how discourse is thus not able to "reflect a world of fixity and determinism," but instead "emerges from the playful equivocation and contextuality of the sign" (Stocker, 2006: 185). It is such an

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discerned within his own utility of the word 'discourse', "treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements" (Mills, 2004, citing Foucault, 1972: 80).

understanding that fits with the general approach of FPDA, and the overall outlook of this thesis project.[46]

Its contextual nature is vital to sensing how discourse works, and the social milieu of which it is part – for there are no individual disengaged textual pieces that are not part of a wider discursive field. Mills makes a key point that "discourse" itself bifurcates into two main categories. By this, she means there is "discourse" as a major overarching structure, and "discourses" which are smaller partialities operative within the former term; and both elements work together, being also indivisibly one (Mills, 2004: 8). However, while this sets out what discourse could be considered to be, discerning how and where discourses are found is also worth consideration. "A discursive structure," Mills suggests:

> … can be detected because of the systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context, and because of the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving (Mills, 2004: 15).

As an example of this understanding working in practice, Mills offers the explanation of how we each, everyday, unwittingly are imbricated in discourses of femininity or masculinity. We can be assured that these discourses are (subterraneously) there and in working order not by noticing or finding them but simply by merit of how we "behave within a certain range of parameters when defining [our]selves as gendered subjects" (Mills, 2004: 15-16).[47] Deborah Britzman provides a helpful definition of this process at length:

> … subjects cannot be uncoupled from the conscious and unconscious of discourses that fashion how subjects become recognized and misrecognized. Every discourse constitutes, even as it mobilizes and shuts out, imaginary communities, identity investments, and discursive practices. Discourses authorize what can and cannot be said; they produce relations

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46 As Geoffrey Bennington, in expanding further on the difference between discourse and text, has summarised "text in general is any system of marks, traces, referrals (don't say references, have a little more sense than that). Perception is a text … Of course text does not mean discourse. Perception is not a discourse, it is a text. Discourse is a text … Text is not a mediation between language and world, but the *milieu* in which any such distinction might be drawn" (Bennington 2006 [1988]: 217-218).

47 In this, similarities can be drawn, theoretically, through the ideas of gender performativity in the work of Judith Butler. Found most notably in her book, *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1999 [1990]), and drawing especially on Foucauldian and Althusserian identity premises, in this Butler was alert to "the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effect* of institutions, practices, discourses, with multiple and diffused points of origin" (Butler, 1999 [1990]: *viii-ix*).

> of power and communities of consent and dissent, and thus discursive boundaries are always being redrawn around what constitutes the desirable and the undesirable and around what it is that makes possible particular structures of intelligibility and unintelligibility (Britzman, 2000: 36).

To relate this back to the argument of this thesis – the subject of which is the biblical God – involves considering discourses of God and the Bible in the context of the Church of Scotland, and analysing how these discourses function in constructing a God-definition from the discursive material generated through practical research. To put it another way, the investigation is one of looking at the boundaries of possibility constraining and constructing who 'God' can be in the discursive regime of the Church. For, as Mills suggests, drawing on Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak," (Foucault, 1972: 49), discourse "is something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation" (Mills, 2004: 15) and this "something else" to be analysed is the concept of the biblical God.[48] "We must make allowances for the complex and unstable processes," Foucault had said:

> … whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1978: 100-101).

As mentioned earlier, FPDA is the paradigm I have been using in investigating the discursive subject matter of the Bible and God. With its poststructuralist orientation, and feminist motivation, there are a variety of reasons why this one has been useful to adopt, and also adapt. After outlining Baxter's understanding of her own theory, I will

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[48] Foucault revolutionised theories of power by displacing the normative understanding of power (*i.e.* rejecting power held in hierarchies, owned by the dominant, and forcibly used by those occupying spaces of dominance to stay on top) by instead realising that power (together with knowledge and truth) is insidious, invasive and everywhere, held by no-one, and flowing between everyone as the intricacies of "capillary power" in a way that is excised but never possessed. This, in itself, led to "epistemic breaks" – points of discontinuity made possible by the fluidity of capillary power in the discursive episteme. In relation to Foucault's discourse theory in terms of the premise of this particular study, Mats Alvesson explains that he is "in opposition to DA, less exclusively focused on language use in micro settings, and refers to broader, institutionalised ideas or reasoning patterns with a material practice referent and with power to define and structure part of social reality" (Alvesson, 2002: 68).

explain how I envisage FPDA as a useful analytic paradigm of my own in this research project, as well as underlining some elements of difference between Baxter's theoretical perspective and my own.

"FPDA is *not* concerned," Baxter asserts, "with the modernist quest of seeking closure or resolutions in its analysis of what discourse means, but rather with foregrounding the diverse viewpoints, contradictory voices and fragmented messages that research data always represents" (Baxter, 2003: 45). Characterised by multiplicity, FPDA begins with open endings, and like all discourse analytic styles is naturally focused on discourse and text. Its analytic style is located in a poststructuralist sense of the intertextual nature of discursive material, and the "principles of complexity, plurality, ambiguity, connection, recognition, diversity, textual playfulness, fictionality and transformation," as Baxter catalogues the terms herself (Baxter, 2008: 245). In those discourses, in Baxter's work, FPDA is drawn to issues of gender – its fluid representation in particular – for this is a paradigm that "regards gender differentiation as one of the most pervasive discourses across many cultures in terms of its systematic power to discriminate between human beings according to their gender and sexuality" (Baxter, 2008: 245).

FPDA is an approach with two central principles, both of which draw on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin – namely, polyphony and heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981) – where polyphony refers, in Baxter's understanding, to 'multiple voices' and heteroglossia to 'competing, differently oriented voices'. Baxter explains that polyphony allows for the "co-existence and juxtaposition of a plurality of voices and accounts," thereby "generating a 'dialogical' or intertextual dynamism" and this is what she is trying to encourage in her discourse analysis (Baxter, 2003: 67). Heteroglossia, on the other hand, involves "the act of making visible the non-official viewpoint, the marginalized, the silenced and the oppressed" while recognising the "ideological struggle at the centre of all discourse" (Baxter, 2003: 69-70). Together, polyphony and heteroglossia provide Baxter with an orienting framework that guides her analysis of the "gaps, ambiguities and contradictions" within discursive material in her FPDA approach (Baxter, 2003: 69).

Baxter's research focus is principally on gender interaction in conversational discourse, with particular attention to the multiplicity of perspectives and fluctuating subject positions therein. Her end goal involves creating "multi-faceted, multi-layered insights" into the situation (Baxter, 2003: 102). My own analytic concerns are quite

different, nonetheless, for, as mentioned earlier, through the research material I am theorising discursive ideas related to the biblical God as understood by churchgoers. However, the elements of polyphony and heteroglossia are still present in this very different project, evident, for instance, in the unconventional juxtaposition of a multiplicity of voices emerging to engage churchgoers' words (conventionally misaligned from academic theorising) with Marcella's indecent theology; and in the various matrices developing in this project between churchgoers, Marcella and Derrida, together with wider academic theories and theologies.[49]

Perhaps less important than delineating particular theoretical ideas, such as Bakhtin's heteroglossia and polyphony (which Baxter has done explicitly, and I have found inadvertently), is realising the potential that FPDA has, as a discourse analytic paradigm based on poststructuralist matrices of multiplicity, to work effectively in very divergent project methodologies. For, if, as Baxter suggests, FPDA can "be defined as a feminist approach to analysing the ways in which speakers negotiate their identities, relationships and positions in their world according to the ways in which they are located by competing yet interwoven discourses" (Baxter, 2003: 1) it is also a paradigm in which a new approach is possible. I think it is also capacious enough to draw parallels between the negotiations of speakers in conversational situations, as in Baxter's methodologies, and the construction of a God-text, a 'God' similarly positioned, negotiated, and provided with an identity through language, and from the discursive milieu of churchgoers (and, concomitantly, the Bible and the Church) in my own.[50]

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[49] As Baxter is already aware, there is a multiplicity of options in how to analyse discourse and, often, it is a case of choosing something that works for the case at hand. However, she points out that it remains important "to draw attention to the *choices* they make in determining exactly how they are going to analyse texts, and then be prepared to justify or explain the effects of those choices" while all the while being "overtly self-aware of the fictionality and textuality of the research process and the phenomenon that any act of research comprises a series of authorial choices and strategies" (Baxter, 2003: 61).

[50] As the sociologist Stuart Hall has said in reference to discourse and identity, "I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture* between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses and, on the other hand, the processes which product subjectivities which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'" (Hall, 1996: 5-6). Such ideas draw upon Louis Althusser's interpellation and performativity theories (*cf.* Althusser, 1971, 1984). In Judith Butler's work, "the mark interpellation makes is not descriptive but inaugurative" (Butler, 1997a: 33) and in doing so departs from Althusser in her recognition in discourses that there need not be overt recognition in discourses creating subjects: "the subject need not always turn around in order to be constituted as a subject, and the discourse that inaugurates the subject need not take the form of a voice at all" (Butler, 1997a: 31), and thereby

While there are parallels, my use of FPDA as a methodological paradigm is pragmatic in spirit and broad in approach, and is much more of an orienting framework than a methodological instruction manual. Baxter, who has herself written "a distinct methodology" for FPDA is enthusiastic that it is used creatively and alternatively, emphasing that "in post-structuralist spirit, there can never be just *one* but a *plurality* of versions constituting a generally recognisable approach" and that "there should never be just *one* version of FPDA, but a whole variety of versions and approaches" (Baxter, 2003: 2, 58). Baxter has already acknowledged how well FPDA fits within a localised multi-method Case Study approach, with ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions like my own (*e.g.* Baxter, 2003: 85-89). Most noticeably, Baxter's FPDA approach is distinctly more traditional in its discourse analysis (specifically in terms of focusing on small transcript sections in-depth, and paying close attention to tightly-structured aspects of turn-taking, for instance) than my own thematic and conceptual style involves, with its looser and less schematic consideration of discursive elements.[51]

Importantly, there is one strong semantic change in the difference between FPDA as Baxter envisioned it and how I am using it, and this involves a shift from 'Feminist Poststructuralist' in Baxter's terminology to 'Feminist-Poststructuralist' (or postfeminist).[52] While Baxter says that FPDA "is not specifically concerned to work on behalf of girls and women who are 'oppressed' by political, economic or ideological reasons," nor "involved in highly motivated ideological struggles or to commit itself to a single liberatory cause" (Baxter, 2003: 190) on the grounds that poststructuralism isn't driven by emancipatory, ideological or materialist ideals, her agenda is still outlined as a "spotlight and focus upon (especially) female voices" and therein lies the 'feminist' aspect of FPDA (Baxter, 2003: 70). In other words, she is adopting a style which engages with a feminist agenda by adding a poststructuralist twist; the emancipatory

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meaning that the "constitution of the subject can take place without the subject's knowing" (Butler, 1997a: 33).

[51] I suggest, though, that differences such as these are down to the agenda of the project itself far more than epistemological or methodological clashes: for, while Baxter is trying to discern speech variations at a micro-level, I am trying to discern discourse concepts at a more thematic level. I do not think the divergence in styles and subjects de-legitimates the use of a single paradigm (FPDA) in a variant way.

[52] I am retaining the designator, FPDA, nonetheless for simplicity. Within what the concept 'FPDA' connotes, nonetheless, is a small but significant change from 'Feminist Poststructuralist' in Baxter's use to 'Feminist-Poststructuralist' in my own. I am placing 'Feminist-Poststructuralist' on a postfeminist trajectory.

agenda of what she understands as more modernist, universalising, foundationalist, second-wave feminism,[53] is replaced by the gender multiplicity that a post-age context can bring, together with the implicit lack of stability in identity that this entails, while still retaining a feminist focus.[54] As Baxter details at length:

> While modernist feminism supports a liberal-humanist belief in a unified notion of woman as an authentic being, post-structuralist feminism has posited that being recognised as female is but one effect of the multiple ways in which individual identities are constituted through discourse. Whereas modernist feminism unifies itself around the Enlightenment cause of freedom from male oppression, post-structuralism has strategically opposed any grand or universalising cause which attempts to appropriate and fix social meanings in its own image. Finally, while it has been a foundational view of feminism that the conditions of women's oppression exist in a bodily, material and pre-discursive sense, post-structuralist theory … contests the notion that femininity and female oppression have a material or emotional reality *outside* discourse (Baxter, 2003: 28).

In all of this, Baxter and I both, from an overall poststructuralist perspective, share the same ideas just elaborated, but our positions differ significantly in the agenda of our research. For in Baxter's 'feminist poststructuralist' position, she is still principally motivated by the concerns of women and is focused on female voices (via a poststructuralist meaning). So, for instance, she hopes through FPDA, as an act of "*feminist* research," to be able to "represent the complexities and ambiguities of *female* experience, and within this to give space to *female* voices that are being silenced or marginalized by dominant discourses," or in other words "select[ing] a feminist focus

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[53] Notably, Baxter is averse to the wave chronology common to feminist theory on the grounds that, with shifts over time, there is a failure to match the diversity within each time period (Baxter, 2003: 4-5; see also Angela Pears, 2004: 9ff. for another, perhaps better, reading of such Feminist thematic ideas as they relate to Christianity especially). I do not fully share Baxter's opinion on this, however, believing, on the contrary, that there have been distinct shifts in feminism that convincingly justify a wave-machine model. More than twenty years ago, Elaine Marks made a early comment on the impending problems that would affect feminist thought as it appear in academic disciplines, referring to it as a place where "various theoretical and ideological strands work side by side, contradicting each other, competing with each other," but not really advancing progressively beyond this (Marks cited in Sherwood, 1996: 268).

[54] Baxter spends a great deal of time elaborating on her belief that a conjunction between feminism and poststructuralism is a fraught, dissonant and tenuous one, and that her "working partnership" of FPDA is something of "a contradiction in terms" (Baxter, 2003: 2). I am less convinced in the size of the problem, as she sees it. There are others, for instance Becky Francis, who draw on the incompatibility Baxter perceives, too, but they are not simultaneously using 'feminism' in the same productive way as Baxter is trying to (*cf.* Francis, 1998: 10-11).

for analytical attention" (Baxter, 2003: 59).[55] In contrast, I am not focusing on women's voices in particular at all. In fact, in this research querying a male God identity is what is important instead. So, while "linguistically all these 'posts' might seem excessive and merely indulgent jargon" (Stringer, 2007: 273), marked as they are "by a proliferation of conflicting definitions that refuse to settle into meaning" (Lather, 2003: 257), the semantic change from 'Feminist Poststructuralist' to 'Feminist-Poststructuralist' or postfeminist is of greater significance than it might seen.[56]

To call my strategy postfeminist is to open it to ambiguity: postfeminism as a "conceptual category and discursive system is still under construction," and having been deployed to contradictory ends, "cannot escape a certain amount of confusion and contradiction" (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 178). Commonly, postfeminism is assumed to be synonymous with 'anti-feminist' (as in against, or contra, feminism)[57] or 'past-feminist' (as in feminism is passé, its agenda either accomplished or rendered worthless).[58] In the 1990's, the newly emergent 'postfeminist' term was harnessed by those opposed to the feminist agenda (helped greatly by the media) and was utilised in

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55 Admittedly, Baxter repeatedly underlines the idea that emancipatory feminist styles do not represent what she thinks. An example of an emancipator style she might disagree with could be, for instance, Celia Kitzinger's statement that "feminism is a politics predicated on the belief that women are oppressed" (Kitzinger, 2000). She is nonetheless still focusing specifically on women, and this is a key difference from my own use of the FPDA paradigm.

56 Derrida has not offered commentary on post-feminist thought in any sense, but he did at times make cautious points about the proclivity of some strands of feminism to create hierarchical systems of their own, or, as Deutscher has summarised, the "reservations [he expressed] about strategies of reversal which aim only to make high what is low; to raise the status of what has been devalued" which involve an oppositional femininity / masculinity binary which is in tension with deconstructive thinking (Deutscher, 2005: 47). In Derrida's own words, "I resist this movement that tends towards a narcissism of minorities that is developing everywhere – including within feminist movements" (Derrida, 2004: 21, cited in Deutscher, 2005: 47).

57 Angela McRobbie is renowned for her theorising on postfeminism as connoting 'anti-feminist', but her recent position is even more distinct in that she believes there is a new, unexpected and perhaps more sinister brand of "anti-feminist sentiment" altogether more potent than earlier backlash positions of the 1980s (McRobbie, 2008: 1). She suggests that in the present day "elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise … as a kind of substitute for feminism" (McRobbie, 2008: 1).

58 Aspects of mourning are attached to some feminist responses to postfeminism – for instance, the claim that "'post-feminism' happened without warning. It seemed to arrive from nowhere. One minute there were feminisms, identified by their diverse political standpoints and their contrasting campaign strategies, the next … it was all over" (Coppock, Haydon and Richter, 1995: 3).

the 'backlash' that resulted (*cf.* Faludi, 1992; Modleski, 1991).[59] As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have summarised, postfeminism in its various guises is all "to do with the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (Negra, 2007: 1).

Postfeminism is a word with more potential than feminism's mourners and anti-feminisms celebrators give it credit for, as it appears to be a positive and constructive term imbued with its own definitive meaning.[60] My understanding of postfeminism is consistent with the usage of the 'post' prefix in the collection of the, now commonplace, post-age words – words such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism. If the 'post' in such terms connotes neither passé nor anti, but, rather, signifies a different understanding of, or an alternative – critical but not superior – relationship to (such as Lyotard's one of incredulity towards modernity's metanarratives; Lyotard, 1984: *xxiii-xxv*) or even a "gesture to the beyond" in relation to the term to which the post is fixed (Bhabha, 1994: 4), then the post in postfeminism acts similarly. As Homi Bhabha has said, in reference to the beyond of the 'post' prefix, it "is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past" but is, instead, 'a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha, 1994: 1), and this is how I use the term.

"Postfeminism," it has been argued elsewhere, is "feminism informed by the key analytical strategies of contemporary thought – psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism" (Gamble, 1999: 3). But, perhaps the best exposition of postfeminism is found in Ann Brooks' *Postfeminisms* (1997), and her definition of the term in this book's opening pages is consistent with my adoption of it for purposes here. Postfeminism refers, she explains, to

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59 Tania Modleski locates postfeminism's emergence quite specifically in 1991, as a response to changing perceptions relating to what the concept 'woman' (and correlatively the word 'feminism') could still mean, if anything. Others (myself included) think of postfeminism's emergence as a more gradual cultural move, influenced by wider paradigm shifts in a post-age milieu.

60 One of the problems with postfeminism in some current material is that it is so effusive that, as a concept, it becomes meaningless by default. For example, Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon have recently theorised that "all articulations of or movements associated with postfeminism are valid and they inform one another" (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 2). They argue for a position where their "usage and understanding of postfeminism [is] motivated less by an attempt to determine and fix its meaning than by an effort to acknowledge its plurality and liminality" (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 7; *cf.* 2009: 178). What the signifier 'postfeminism' can then usefully mean is, to my mind, questionable.

> a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change (Brooks, 1997: 4).

Trinh T. Minh-Ha, likewise, argues that postfeminism is methodologically vital in expressing "a different form of subjectivity that does not come 'after' feminism so much as 'with' feminism, remaining alert to the movement's political closures …" (cited in Foss, 1999: 237); and, with that, this is a postfeminist strategy that respects the position that feminism has established for women and applauds its achievements, but, at the same time, must then occupy a different space from feminism as a consequence of the new thought world that other dimensions of academic theories have opened up.

It is in this sense that I am approaching postfeminism differently to Baxter in her 'Feminist Poststructuralist' position on discourse analysis. As already delineated, this is because Baxter retains a sense of a distinctly 'feminist' position even if influenced by post-age ideals. My problem with 'feminism' as a category is part of what 'postfeminism' is for me; a position that itself draws on the tension that exists between concepts and ideals that do not work any longer, making feminism a meaningless term for me. It is not a case of realising the difficulties of a third wave "problematized, splintered" multiple feminist position out of various available (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe, 2000: 3), but of failing to understand what it means to call it 'feminism' any longer in the first place.[61]

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[61] Over the past decade or so, enquiries surrounding women's use of claiming 'feminist' (by women) as a term and how the values it might hold in theological circles has now been around for many years. As earliest as 1999, in their edited book, Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier were asking questions such as: "… has this project of analysis and reconstruction based upon feminist principle run its natural course?" (Sawyer and Collier, 1999: 12). Similarly, Marcella questioned, in 2004, whether "it is true we are living at a time when … there are voices who could like to declare women's theologies either obsolete or too contradictory to be taken seriously" (2004b: 157-158); and then, in 2005, she wrote that she was "not even sure if the term Feminist Theology is still relevant. If it can still be retained it is only if we are aware of the extent to which its context (and content) have changed" (2005d: 270).

viii.
Procedures

The challenge to theology is to think differently by freeing theology from what it 'silently thinks' to enable Christian theology to recognize its hidden regimes of knowledge-power beneath the rituals of its performances
James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (2004: 5)

"The phrase 'research design'," write Rosaline Barbour and John Schostak, "sounds powerful, clean, scientific, solid. A bit scary. Really, at times, it can feel like a mess" (Barbour and Schostak, 2005: 43). Matters of methodology are important ones, but also complex and difficult to control. In fact, setting things out in a section on methodology makes everything appear far tidier, retrospectively, than in practice they ever could have been. Research, in reality, often involves an element of pragmatism: a sense of informed compromises within available, workable limits (Blaikie, 2000: 305), involving a methodological strategy that is most effective within the constraints at hand. With its mix and juxtaposition of methods, discourses, theories, styles, frameworks and approaches, this project could be said to be "grounded on an epistemology of complexity" that is something of a bricolage (Kincheloe, 2005: 324). Originating from the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida has summarised what he conveyed in relation to this bricolage concept:

> The *bricoleur*, says Levi-Strauss, is someone who uses 'the meanings at hand,' that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous …
> (Derrida, 2003a: 360, referring to Levi-Strauss, 1961: 24).

It is as a *bricoleur* within this study in particular that using "the meanings at hand" involved a Case Study approach.

Earlier, in discussing the discourse theory of Sara Mills, mention was made of the differing ways discourse can be understood. Mills, following a Foucauldian trajectory, has suggested that discourse can potentially be recognised in two main ways: as a general overarching discourse and smaller individual discourses, or discursive

statements (Mills, 2004: 8).[62] Though separate, these elements work together within an overall discursive regime in which the small discourses are contained within the big discourse, and, in turn, constraining what the smaller ones can mean. To skew a metaphor of Jean-Francois Lyotard (by replacing incredulity with co-existence), there is something of the difference between a metanarrative quality (big Discourse) and the place of the minor stories at play – with ones of the *petit récits* (little discourses) working together to produce a singularity containing both (Lyotard, 1984: *passim*).[63]

A further parallel can be found in the Case Study approach featuring in this research project, for there is something of a big (capitalized) Case Study and smaller case studies working together here. For instance, while a 'Case Study' approach can be considered a method in itself (alongside, for example, questionnaires and interviews; *e.g.*, Gillham, 2000: 13), I am using it differently as "a research strategy" (Hartley, 2004: 323). This approach helps to convey a general overarching metanarrative or operative context that can be presented in ever-widening circles: from individual churches to Edinburgh Presbytery, and from the Church of Scotland to Reformed Protestantism, for instance.[64] These factors feature as a discursive regime, a big story, in which the smaller, more individualised discourses are texts read within the former context; in other words, when the terms 'God' or 'Bible' are spoken, they are considered meaningful *because* of the discursive structure of the big Discourse to which they belong.

In comparison, the particular case studies in this project are those individual congregations (and individual people within those churches) whose discourses are part of the overarching Case Study context by default. If Benedict Anderson's notion of an "imagined community," to adopt another metaphor, is "one made up of individuals who do not interact face-to-face but who nevertheless identify as a community," (Thwaites,

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[62] In a discourse episteme, Foucault suggests that there are two different kinds of knowledge in Foucault's understanding, where '*savoir*' relates to the wider discourse field which enables '*connaissance*' (*i.e.* smaller, more localised and individualized knowledges); the former then determines the overall shape of the episteme (Scheurich and McKenzie, 2005: 848).

[63] Of course, Lyotard would have himself resisted and challenged the incredulous dominant and totalising metanarratives, *replacing* their capacity for homogenization with the little stories he favoured instead – rather than accede to the working partnership illustrated here.

[64] Even if "the role played by denominational cultures has seldom been widely considered within the field of congregational studies," pushed out by methodological styles that prefer "idiosyncratic local culture of individual congregations," (Richter, 2004: 169; *cf.* Stringer, 1999), it is nonetheless important to recognise the role the denominational matrix has on understanding the way that things – like bibles and gods in this instance – can be discursively analysed.

Davis and Mules, 2002: 145, referring to Anderson, 1991) then this imagined community is found within a meta-locale Case Study milieu in which the micro-locale case studies are identifiable, grounded contexts through which interaction levels are to be found. The smaller particular case studies are contained within, and perhaps ceilinged by, the wider generalised Case Study which is determinative in allowing what is thought to be thought.

To then summarise with reference to this research project itself, it could be understood that the Case Study is the wider situation of geographical and denominational specificity within the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh; and the four case studies – the individual churches in which research was conducted – exist within the aforementioned meta-locale context. Using an analysis reached through such a framework boundary therein, particular multi-methods involved interviews, focus groups, and self-completion questionnaires in each of the case study churches. Evolved in concert with my own ontological and epistemological perspective, this triangulated premise was not an approach done in a spirit of reliability, plausibility or credibility, but instead one that functioned in giving different constructive aspects on a bigger picture through which such issues of believability, transparency, trustworthiness and consistence could then be opened up (*cf.* Bloor and Wood, 2006: 172; Willig, 1999: 140).

In researching those churchgoers and churches in particular, my approach was one of purposive selection – a methodological angle which involved a strategic choice in "selecting information-rich cases" to illustrate the issues and questions of concern to the project (Patton, 2002: 272); so, by borrowing a fitting phrase of Carla Willig's, it could be understood as a study of "not telling it 'like it is' but rather saying 'look at it this way'" (Willig, 1999: 140). Each of the designated methods chosen were first evaluated by their particular scope in generating suitable discursive data, such as those discourses that could illustratively describe, explore and explain interesting fragments from churchgoers for subsequent textual analysis within a general FPDA paradigm.[65]

Recognising that any research design is inseparable from both the methods it contains and the data it generates leads to further consideration of this triangulated project's "theoretical priorities" (Silverman, 2005: 139). In reference to her important work in re-working the word 'triangulation' to a more fitting concept of 'crystallization',

[65] Perhaps worth noting that this was a choice that necessarily involved a compromise between ideals and practicalities, nonetheless (*cf.* Blaikie, 2000: 305).

Laural Richardson issues an interesting heuristic trope that offers a useful outlook germane to the type of deconstructive research I have been undertaking. "There are far more than 'three sides' from which to approach the world," Richardson has said:

> I propose that the central image for 'validity' for postmodernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central image is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous … Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of 'validity' … provid[ing] us with a deepended, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic (Richardson, 1994: 522).

From this reading then, the three specific forms of method in my overall case study research design brought myriad possibilities for refraction by generating individual and collective aspects within each of these strategies.

Approaching the project from an overall inclusive qualitative-plus-quantitative dimension has provided opportunities in emphasising the collective linguistic and discursive elements of methods used; by this, the common eviscerating division distinction between research methods considered qualitative (constructively, creatively understood elements) in interviews/focus groups and quantitative (traditionally positivistic, empirical values) in self-completion questionnaires need not be important at all.[66] Purposively side-lining any qualitative/quantitative distinction in my research study, I am following sociologist Anne Oakley's apt ideas that dismissing the necessity of programmatically fixed methodological labels in this way instead allows them to be practically open and fluid elements, and by doing so in attaining the best interpretative understanding of issues of concern (Oakley, 2000: 28, 303).[67]

While still maintaining as much diversity as possible, from a pragmatic point of view, this then involved selecting the most appropriate congregations and churchgoers who might provide the "most relevant comprehensive and rich information" (Ritchie,

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[66] To one extent, there is a paradigm shift between the qualitative and quantitative divide around these "insurmountable" elements of how sociological research might be "predicting, explaining or understanding" its results (Henn, Weistein and Foard, 2006: 23).

[67] I am less interested in paradigm shifts, the "methodological straightjacket" (Couldry, 2000: 135), than in deconstructing the unnecessary dualistic dichotomy in the first place, leading "that tired old debate" (Boynton, 2005: 27). While "categories are … mechanisms for power and control fixating our ways of seeing" (Alvesson, 2002: 90) in qualitative research projects especially, there is a necessity to reduce very large amounts of data so that discourse fragments can be selected for further theoretical analysis. In this project, I used the leading 'NVivo' software programme to aid coding, queries and analysis of data in this process.

2003: 49) for the project within the limits of time, resources, area, contexts, and scope I had available to me (Gray, 2003: 101).[68] At a procedural level, I defined my purposive selection of research locales and participants in the following way: firstly, boundary parameters were placed around central Edinburgh Church of Scotland congregations by postcode area; and, secondly, of the remaining 40, I then identified 4 case study congregations interested in participating while still remaining alert to seeking as wide a geographical, socio-economic and theological selection as possible.[69] In each of the 4 case study congregations, 3 different methods – interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires – were used.

As commonly deployed in sociological research, interviews can offer a "structured conversation" (Grant, 2003: 95) on specific relevant themes by producing "a context-bound description" (Bloor and Wood, 2006: 105) to particular reseach advantage. Such techniques well-match the multi-method Case Study context and discourse analytic perspective I elicited for this study. From a postmodern viewpoint, even if not by accessing an assumed reality, but, rather, imbuing potential meanings through a literary premise that is really "a construction, a fiction" (Denzin, 2001: 25), qualitative interviewing encourages a strong depth of insight and personal expression that no other methodological strategy quite matches and it does so by significantly providing a large volume of useful discursive material that then contributes to subsequent analysis.

Representing my own convention of semi-structured interviews in particular, I loosely followed a thematically-arranged schedule. From this premise, I appropriately expanded upon points in which to cover relevant questions, and did so in a more

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[68] Although 'sampling' is the conventional term for such procedures, it is often quantitatively understood, and, for such reasons, 'selectivity' is a more appropriate word for research that is naturally untroubled by a "spectre of representativeness" (Gray, 2003: 100) from a qualitatively orientated, non-empirical perspective (*cf.* O'Reilly, 2005: 39).

[69] Beginning with the standard research procedure of identifying one as a pilot study, the first of the four case studies I selected trialled all aspects of each research method in one congregation. A pilot study can be undertaken in two main ways: either as an intentionally partial "miniature version" sized down to scale (Payne and Payne, 2004: 220); or, deliberately executed in such a way that the research material gathered from the pilot is of potentially equal value to the overall study. Fortunately, my research design at its pilot stage was stable enough without further alternations or refinements as required, and this then allowed the pilot to merge into a standalone case study in its own rights. Prior to the selection of the identifiable case study churches, at its preliminary stage I undertook a familiarization scoping exercise with observational research that entailed visiting various Church of Scotland congregations implicitly during their worship services.

informally conversational way that still allowed freedom for the arrival of incipient, incisive elements as they emerged.[70] In total, 16 people from the 4 case study congregations in Edinburgh were interviewed for about 1 hour with their permission, and our conversations were digitally recorded at the time, and, subsequently, were fully transcribed for later analysis.[71]

Following on from this, and by similarly involving respondents that were identified by ministers, I invited a selection of churchgoers for focus group discussions from the same 4 case study churches (25 people collectively; individually 7, 7, 5 and 6 in each particular group) to be involved. Usefully companions to interviews, such qualitative focus groups methods allowed access to those "concentrated conversations that might never occur in the 'real world'" (Krueger, 1994: 31) on topics important to the research; and, in this scenario, the discussions churchgoers were involved in were loosely scheduled in general sections on the Bible and God, with topics that incorporated written words and phrases on cards, photographic prints and newspaper media.[72] Even though – just like the interviews – focus groups similarly represent thoughts in illustratively contrived and somewhat artificial situation, such discussions clearly "promote group interaction" by acquiring comments from collective "free-flowing debate" (Finch and Lewis, 2003: 179) more than any one-to-one interviews could uncover. Furthermore, in effectively evaluating issues through the particularities of interaction avenues from different situated knowledge from various social locations, this method also helped to generate distinctive research material for this project in a more dynamic, contextual way (*cf.* Lewis, 2003: 58).

Including 4 case study churches in the research, elements of the questionnaire dimension were slightly different in that it exceeded them by a further 7 additional standalone churches who were involved on a questionnaire-only basis and so, bringing together those 11 churches involved in total, the self-completion questionnaire itself

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[70] In qualitative interviewing, flexibility of approach permits standards of promoting and probing to help guide the process (*e.g.*, Arkesy and Knight, 1999: 84).

[71] Partial interviewee transcriptions, plus the general interview schedule itself, can be found in Appendix C and H. Being an outsider to the respective congregations myself, and for practical reasons, it seemed fairly efficient and effective to invite ministers to become 'key informants' in independently selecting interview/focus group research participants for the case study research on their own initiative. Within this criteria framework, it was also important that no repetition-overlap occurred between focus group and interview participants in each case study; and still remaining alert to this, ministers were also asked to be as diverse as possible in selecting participants on various factors (*i.e.*, age range, mix of men and women and so on).

[72] See Appendix I for a general summary of the initial focus group schedule guide.

(with questions incorporating different topics on the Bible, Church and God) with over 2000 openly available questionnaire copies issued in those churches for a specific time. Questionnaires were returned to me by churchgoers using freepost, resulting in a higher than normal 25% return rate that was then available for subsequent analytical reading.[73] Being consulted from a qualitative orientation, the material generated from churchgoers questionnaire replies provided incisively distinct research material which could involve many more people than the other methods could accommodate, and also asked particular questions that the interviews and focus groups could not. Lastly, questionnaires were also especially useful in addressing latent cultural assumptions by, for instance, analysing the seeming prevalence of certain thought-patterns in congregations precisely through the restrictions on options available to people completing them.[74]

"Methods are," as Carla Willing puts it, "a means to an end" (Willig, 2001: 20), and, in conclusion, it is in moving away from such a focus on methodological strategic procedures that then leads to such issues newly centralised in the research generated for this thesis. Idea-stages of any research project occur at many points throughout its gestation, but perhaps never more so than in situations of which the interview, focus group and questionnaire elements are read through material transcribed for later analytical discussion. Janice Morse has called insight:

> … the neglected and overlooked mechanism, the Cinderella of qualitative inquiry … almost never valued as one of the major processes in qualitative analysis. We never read, '… and then I had an idea' (Morse, 2006: 94).

Yet, these Cinderella-insights that Morse forefronts are so important – they are, in fact, ideas that seem "*critical* to understanding 'what is going on,' for seeing the implicit, for uncovering, for interpretation" (Morse, 2006: 94) – and they convey the important initial spark that brings any research study a worthwhile endeavour. Cinderella-esque on this point, Marcella similarly filled her thoughts with strongly inventive ideas that were continually laden with creative contingency; in proceeding further, the last section of

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73 Further details can be found in Appendix D, E and J.

74 Basic transcription conventions were followed in this project which, unlike more conversation analytic styles, did not include paralinguistic features, marks and so on. Each transcript has been anonymised in accordance with my ethical policy (*cf.* App. F), and with participants signing Data Protection, Informed Consent and Agreement to Participate forms (*cf.* App. L). In order to aid clear cross-references to the Appendix texts, line numbers for interviews, focus groups and questionnaire material are fully utilised in the main text.

this introduction – entitled 'Chapter Cartographies' – outlines more of such conceptual ideals that frames each of the chapter contents later to come.

ix.
Chapter Cartographies

For a deconstructive operation, possibility
would rather be a danger, the danger of becoming
an available set of rule-governed procedures,
methods, accessible practices …
Jacques Derrida (1992: 312)

As outlined in a general sense through previous pages, this study is mapped by its unlikely collaboration between the constituent thought forces of Jacques Derrida, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Edinburgh churchgoers (congealing deconstructive impossibilities, theological indecencies and lived realities at myriad junctures along the way). As Derrida once commented more generally in reference to "what one calls religions," within and between the interstices of any such venture like this one "there are tensions, heterogeneity, disruptive volcanoes, sometimes texts … which cannot be reduced to a corpus, or a system" (in Sherwood and Caputo, 2005: 231). Nonetheless, an element of structural arrangement seems to offer useful co-ordinates in navigating the forthcoming themes. In setting out elements as preliminary markers to the developing subjects of the chapters to come, as an overview I will first consider the meta-thematic philosophical role of its conceptual idiom of impossibility before, subsequently, illustrating the proleptic shape of each chapter individually and in a more progressive, programmatic manner.

Derrida once wrote, "Only write what is impossible, that ought to be the impossible-rule" (cited in Caputo, 1997a: *xvii*), and deconstruction, as he said elsewhere, has "often been defined as the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, of the most impossible" (Derrida 1995b: 43 in Sherwood, 2004: 186). In this thesis in particular, impossibility is central to the elements of its focused issues surrounding its analytic premise of thinking God differently through the developing tensions between Marcella and churchgoers. Consequently, before charting an overlook of its chapter thematic, an understanding of how the concept 'impossibility' plays in it is helpful, beginning first by further saying that in Derrida's thinking impossibility means more than one thing. Like all works in deconstruction it disseminates, since no term holds a single positive meaning hostage. The disseminatory potential of endless and various meanings, of plurivocality, is never far from deconstruction. Deconstruction,

however, is not something that Derrida concocted in test-tubes and applied to the logocentric linguistic world, that illusory place of self-presence where metaphysical concepts such as Truth and Reality earn capitals in faraway lands beyond language: on the contrary, it is already there - in words, in language, integral to everything that is without instigation (Aichele *et al.*, 1995: 135).[75] And dissemination is a differential structure that collapses the scaffolding between a word and those taken-for-granted meanings, while simultaneously *being* those upholding iron bars as well (Caputo, 1997a: 9-10).[76] In Derrida, that which is simply what "is not possible" is entirely different from his sense of impossibility as "that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility" (Derrida cited in Biesta, 2001b: 48).

This endless difference and deferral of meaning – Derrida's neologism *différance*[77] – is the mechanism that makes any concept possible, revealing the natural impurity of meaning: for meaning to claim what it is, it concomitantly depends on deferring what it is not. To say that 'God is …' includes, within such closure, all those deferred differences that are elided via the process of such naming. Or, as Caputo has said, "*différance* is the nameless name of the open-ended, uncontainable, generalizable play of traces. And *Khora* is its sur-name" (Caputo, 1997b: 105). *Khora*, the non-place of

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[75] As Biesta conveys in relation to this sense of reading metaphysics from a position of deconstructive challenge, this means that "there are no simple unsignified, transcendental signifiers that fix and warrant the meaning of our words, that there are no originals to which our words can refer" (Biesta, 2001b: 42).

[76] Deconstruction deconstructs binarchical thinking (or logocentrism to use a more Derridean term); it dismantles the easy, and apparently naturalistic, hierarchy between speech and writing, between an ontologically superior metaphysical 'out there' and a reading apparently based upon it. Usefully summarising his deconstructive agenda in reference to a rare mechanistic outlook providing by him in *Positions*, Derrida details how his "first phase is the exposure of a hierarchy, of the assumed superiority of one term over the other; the second phase is the reversal of that hierarchy, that is, the promotion of the secondary and derivative term to the position of superiority for strategic reasons; and the third phase is the re-inscription of the difference between the two terms" (Derrida, 2004a: 49).

[77] As Catherine Belsey's concise summary details, Derrida's development of his conceptual use of the term *différance* (as difference *and* deferral; *cf.* Derrida, 1976) begins with a critical development from Saussure's structuralistic sign system of network of differences which led to post-structuralism and deconstruction in Derrida's thinking: "According to Saussure," Belsey explains:

> … speech is the original signifier of meaning, and the written word is derived from the spoken word. The written word is thus a representation of the spoken word … In Derrida's account, meaning is no longer seizable, a pure intelligibility accessible to our grasp. Deferred, as well as differed, pushed out of reach, meaning becomes undecidable. Thus, we can no longer understand the signifier to be preceded by an anterior truth, a meaning, the presence of a signified whose existence ultimately necessitates a transcendental signified (God, name, reason) to which all truths can be referred (Belsey, 2002a [1980]: 136).

différance, is a third space "where the abyss in things opens up and we catch a glimpse of the groundlessness of our beliefs and practices" (Caputo, 1997b: 98). In other words, *Khora* is the un-titled, un-locatable, un-identifiable, non-name that enables thinking to happen and thoughts to begin, the very "spacing of deconstruction" that makes possible the endlessness of all possibilities (Derrida, 1995: 80 in Caputo, 1997a: 40). *Khora* is that "happy fault of a poetics of the possible," as John Caputo has put it both respectfully and affectionately, for "without *Khora*, there is no 'impossible,' no poetics of the possible, no poetics of the possibility of the impossible, because there would be nothing to drive us to the impossible" in the absence of the potentialities *Khora's* idiom can bring (Caputo in Dooley, 2003: 126-127).[78]

The disseminatory possibilities of 'impossibility' are variant. What is impossible is that which is inconceivable. Christianity's God is the God of the Bible; and it seems impossible – inconceivable even – to scythe the Bible from its God. It similarly appears impossible to divest this God of biblical supports, namely an identity recognised as patriarchal heterosexuality. So what seems further inconceivable is that Christianity might displace the Bible; it appears to be an impossible feat. As such, it is impossible for the Church's God to be another God than this one. However, this is not problematic until the Bible is itself considered problematic, until the biblical God of Christianity is something of an impossible deity, or until the biblical God is impossibly strange. What is impossible is also that which is ridiculous, or out-of-the-question. For some feminist and queer theologians, for instance, Christianity's God could be considered impossibly absurd: as the Bible's version, it could conceivably be alleged that this is a God stuck fast in muddy heteronormative masculinity, and this will not do. In this sense, the biblical God's heterosexual masculinity could be termed a ridiculous God, a God of oppression, an impossible God.

But, the impossible is also the unworkable – the hopeless – and the alternative God that might possibly replace the Impossible God is perhaps an impossible God for the Church: for such an alternative God comes in armoury replete with a tenuous and tangential relationship to the biblical God. Such a God is an impossible, impracticable,

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[78] As Caputo conveys it in specific relation to Derrida's important involvement with this complex concept, *Khora* is perhaps best illustrated via the mechanisms of its meaning: "*Khora* … is not the name of any historical entity, of a person or a thing, in a time of a place. *Khora* is a surname for *différance* … which supplies the time and the place (the possibility of spatial and temporal grids) for things in time and place, and it is given to us in a 'figure' in Plato's *Timaeus*" (Caputo in Dooley, 2003: 44-45).

God for Christianity with its central Bible-God; so, it would seem unlikely that an alternative God could be a viable elixir for churches. What is impossible can be that which is unthinkable, absurd, and hopeless even; the arguments are confusingly circular while the conclusions seem clear. For Derrida, however, the impossible is also (and more vitally) what justice is, and what forgiveness, giving and hospitality are too.[79] To Derrida, the impossible is irreducible: it is that which is striven for but is perpetually unattainable and elides ownership, that which motivates and drives partial acts of justice, forgiveness, giving and hospitality, but which is never (and could never be) fully and unconditionally realised. Such realisation is itself impossible. It is impossible, Derrida asserts, to say 'now there is justice' or 'justice has been done' for justice is never complete (but perpetually futural) for all situations, places and people.[80] If the Church's God, the biblical God, is haunted by *différance*, troubled by ghostly Gods that do not fit inside its predetermined divine-persona edges, there is impossible potential, (even if that potential seems forever stymied because the God/Bible/Church triumvirate, as already detailed earlier, is incontrovertible), of the futural compulsion to somehow continue into the unknown.

And like the best of all journeys, it vaguely knows where it is going, but cannot begin to imagine what may be conceived. In a voyage enabled by the premise that "not everything is deconstructible, or there would be no point to deconstruction" (Caputo, 1997b: 131), it involves a commitment seemingly so impossibly inconceivable. Coming from an unsettling position while trialling ideas that are still somehow strangely engaging, deconstruction, as Caputo has said, "always inhabits the distance between something impossible … of which we dream, and all the existing actualities and foreseeable possibilities with which we are more or less discontent" (Caputo, 1997b: 70);

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[79] Justice is understood by Derrida as in another realm, over-and-against the inferior term 'law' that comes complete with its "element of calculation" (Derrida, 1992 [1989]: 16). To him, the law and justice are very different, a difference which marks justice as that which "gives the impulse, the drive or the movement to improve the law, that is, to deconstruct the law" (Derrida, 1997: 16). As such, as Derrida puts it, "justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside and beyond law, is not deconstructible" (Derrida, 1992 [1989]: 14).

[80] In *Force of Law*, Derrida's comments on the meaning and mechanisms of justice in what the concept means to him are helpful: "There is apparently no moment in which a decision can be called presently and fully just: either it has not yet been made according to a rule, and nothing allows us to call it, or it has already followed a rule – whether received, confirmed, conserved or reinvented – which in its turn is not absolutely guaranteed by anything; and, moreover, if it were guaranteed, the decision would be reduced to calculation and we couldn't call it just" (Derrida, 1992: 24).

and in this thesis, questions of Christianity with a decentralised non-elevated lower-status Bible and a biblical God that might never again be straightforwardly understood in his conventional hegemonically masculinity – and these are impossibilities for an endless, yet worthwhile, pursuit.

In this, the themes ahead consider alternative places for Christianity and the mainstream Church by considering ideas of questions of impossibility in particular. Riddled with positivity and potential they are places where "the im- of 'impossible'," as Caputo has said, "… does not mean a denial or negation of possibility but something that propels us into the most radical of all possibilities, the possibility of *the* impossible, which is a matter of faith" (Caputo, 2002: 90). Such ventures involve visionary ideas that form the meta-context of the chapters to come, which might involve:

> … not simply a passion for the God who is, or for the God who is and has and will be … [but] for the God who *may be*, who may be more than we imagine, more than our imagination can contain, the God who may be more than God, who is yet to be what God can be … (Caputo, 2002: 87).

Impossibility loiters in its latent interstices, often obliquely and sometimes directly, throughout this investigation asking such a query so entitled as 'An Impossibly Indecent God?' – and this is the question threading itself through all the ideas surrounding the next four chapters: the first three form Part One – *Deconstructing the Bible and its God* – and the fourth features in Part Two – *Challenging Contexts for the Biblical God.*

Arranged rhythmically throughout, each of its chapters are subdivided triadically. The first subsection of each chapter is introductory, and, by invoking some cultural illustrations germane to its general topic in a contemporary media idiom, it helps to contextualise the themes to be analysed in the second section. In those middle chapter sections, introductory themes of the first are carried forward into the second by a progressing dialogue between Marcella (and Indecent Theology) and churchgoers (in discourse fragments analysed through practical research material), and these are found within the tensions developing between both in relation to their ideas about God and Christianity, the Bible and the Church as the four chapters proceed. Each chapter concludes with a final subsection that illustrates the ideas of the tensions found between Marcella and churchgoers in relation to each chapter's themes in an engaging and positive way, and this is constructed by means of integrating ideas from Derrida's deconstructive thinking on a variety of relevant questions of possibilities and potential.

Chapter 1 helps to situate the central questioning elements of the study itself, and it begins with a cultural illustration that asks introductory questions of God as they relate to a nationwide atheist campaign promoted on buses and billboards recently (1.1). This is followed (in 1.2) by developing the dialogue becoming apparent in the nascent tensions sensed between Marcella and churchgoers. In mapping this through a seemingly innocent and perhaps straightforward question – 'Who is God?' – the process of asking such questions of God are already noted as difficult, and hugely ambiguous, enquiries in themselves. A querying outlook frames the whole tone of this chapter especially, but such questions are to be found in each of the others as well; and the tensions starting out in chapter 1 between churchgoers and Marcella are also sustained from the earliest of its junctures right through to the thesis' concluding pages. Likewise, the Derridean premise of open questioning pursuits is developed (in 1.3) through deconstructive thinking that concludes it by incorporating the heuristic of the possibility found to be inherent within impossibilities along the way; as such, it is a concluding point in which "the trace has never seemed so celebrated, so wondrous, such a gift" (Gallop, 2005: 19) and, like impossibility itself, is understood to be full of potential.

If the introductory chapter's role is one of establishing a questioning orientation, one that underlines the kind of tensions in what is being asked, these tensions are heightened quite sharply in chapter 2 through its important discourse that focuses especially on biblical themes. The first section (2.1) begins by introducing an understanding of the dual rubric of 'material Bible' (a concept by which I mean the Bible as an object), and 'biblical material' (*i.e.* its subject matter), and this is detailed through cultural illustrations of biblical examples in particular situations, the most important of which involved a mêlée that erupted around a Bible installation defaced at an art gallery in Glasgow. The argument then proceeds by investigating questions of the status of the Bible in wider culture, as well as in Christianity, and by paying attention to its decisive role in determining who 'God' might be understood in, for, and by the Church (in 2.2). The themes of material Bible and biblical material are then seen to relate to tensions accumulating between Marcella and churchgoers through their alternative positions of understanding the Bible's status and function in Christianity and the Church. Rounding off this chapter, Derrida's ideas are centred on alternative readings of the Bible in relation to its connection with God-possibilities and questions of forgiveness (in 2.3). It is through such things that "traditions are to be 'taken on' – to

be claimed as well as challenged, affirmed while contested" (Naas, 2003: *xviii-xxiii*), and in Derrida's thinking this is also seen to incorporate the Bible as it might relate to thinking about God.

Chapter 3, like the first two, brings ideas together in discussing the emerging differences found between Marcella and churchgoers on issues related to God-concepts, but it does so in a way that is especially Christological. In its first section (3.1), this chapter focuses on media articles that illustrate alternative versions of conceptions of Jesus, and it does so by drawing upon artistic, theatrical and advertising examples (by David Mach, Jo Clifford and a billboard in New Zealand). These ideas proceed into the chapter's next section (3.2), which focuses on the tensions between Marcella's reading of Christological ideas alongside the different perspectives shared by churchgoers through the research study; and in the process, this also incorporates – by extension – general ideas of God and Bible at the same time. With the identity politics of Jesus and God fully centred, chapter 3 concludes by asking questions of re-reading possibilities as they are presented in and through deconstruction's idiom. In Derrida's writing (in 3.3), such ideas like the 'messianic structure' and 'innumerable genders' are found to be useful in his lexicon in attempting to open up possibilities for God. As Derrida himself believed, "deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening … so as to allow for the passage toward the other" (Derrida, 1989: 60).

As its final discussion, chapter 4 is slightly different in style than the first three. Similar to the earlier chapters' introductory sections, this one also draws on artistic avenues of light and emptiness, life and death, as presented especially in the works of Nathan Coley and Martin Creed (4.1); but, unlike the earlier ones, the tensions discussed between Marcella and churchgoers in the second section (4.2) are amalgamated, and perhaps strengthened, with a concluding questioning style. So, more sharply defined in focus, this final chapter situates the tensions discussed so far by placing its ideas next to everyday issues known by churchgoers. In doing so, questions are still left to be positively open and on purpose – opened up not just by the differing positions on the contemporary problems it discusses, but also by re-inscribing, in these stories, any potential possibilities of an impossibly indecent God in the process. To this end, the thesis ends with a concluding epilogue focused on elements of the writing of Marcella and Derrida that resists any attempt to close-down the ongoing tension-filled

discussions this thesis has not just been presented by, but has found value in, throughout (4.3). Releasing such possibilities might then mean that:

> The future pries open the present by promising us the possibility of something new, the chance of something different, something will transform the present into something else (Caputo, 2001: 7).

PART ONE
Deconstructing the Bible and its God

To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecideable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it, to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed.
Deconstruction in a nutshell. But take away the assurance of the text's authority, the critic's control, and the primacy of meaning and the possession of this formula does not guarantee much.
Why should we undo and redo a text at all? …
It is a complex question
Gayatri C. Spivak (in Derrida, 1976: *lxxvii*)

The idea behind deconstruction is to break all such locks, to unlock texts and institutions, beliefs and practices, not in such a way as to say you cannot have such things, but only to say that you cannot have a lock on
John D. Caputo (1997a: 53)

1
Impossibly Indecent Inquiries: God, gender and justice

My way of praying, if I pray, has more than one edge at the same time. There is something very childish here, and when one prays one is always a child. If I gather images from my childhood, I find images of God as a Father – a severe, just Father with a beard – and also, at the same time, images of a Mother who thinks I am innocent, who is ready to forgive me. This is the childish layer of my prayers, those I perform once a day, for instance, before I go to bed, or a prayer that I might pray right now. There is another layer, of course, which involves my culture, my philosophical experience, my experience of a critique of religion that goes from Feuerbach to Nietzsche. This is the experience of a nonbeliever, someone who is constantly suspicious of the child, someone who asks, 'To who am I praying? Whom am I addressing? Who is God?

Jacques Derrida (in Sherwood and Hart, 2005: 30)

Tell me what your God look like, Celie? …
Okay, I say. He big and old and tall and graybearded and white.
He wear white robes and go barefooted.
Blue eyes? Sort of bluish-gray. Cool. Big though.
White lashes, I say. She laugh.

Alice Walker (1983: 165-6)

The practical task of feminist theology is interpretative … and it is interpretative of the construct called 'everyday life'

Marcella Althaus-Reid (1997: 45)

Whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell – a secure axiom or a pithy maxim – the very idea is to crack it open and disturb this tranquillity

John D. Caputo (1997b: 32)

But fear rarely furthers insight … On the contrary, it is because signs cannot answer our anxious questions, our search for authoritative certitude, that we must have the courage to take decisions

Mieke Bal (2008: 140)

1.1
Of Billboards and Buses

Neither imaginative religion nor creative
agnosticism / atheism really thrives on mottos.
I'm certain of that. Probably.
Ron Ferguson (2009, January 12)

On Edinburgh's Portobello Road in 2009, a couple of happy, sprightly pre-schoolers appeared on a billboard launched to mark Universal Children's Day.[81] Behind them was a series of colourful identifiers in *feint* script: 'Buddhist Child,' 'Anarchist child,' 'Mormon child,' 'Catholic child,' 'Protestant child,' 'Post-modernist child,' 'Agnostic child' and so on. On top of this word collection was the following bold message, articulated, apparently, on behalf of the animated children themselves: "Please Don't Label Me. Let me grow up and choose for myself," the advert read. The poster was one of several representing the culmination of the 'Atheist Bus Campaign'.[82]

The 'Atheist Bus Campaign' originated with Ariane Sherine, a Guardian columnist who had an unhappy experience running into one stern message on two different London buses in a single day. The questioning slogan on each bus – "When the Son of Man comes, will he find Faith on the Earth?" (Luke 18: 8) – offered a link to the JesusSaid.org website, which Sherine duly followed to find that she, as a non-believer, might:

> … be condemned to everlasting separation from God and then you spend all eternity in torment in hell … Jesus spoke about this as a lake of fire which was prepared for the devil and all his angels (demonic spirits) …
> (Sherine, 2008a, June 20; was referencing, in the Bible, Matthew 25: 41).

So the 'Atheist Bus Campaign' began with an accusatory 'URL' on public transport to hellfire promises from a pernicious God.[83]

Sherine, media savvy and unperturbed by the presence of persuasive marketing ideologies *per se* but, rather, incensed by the sinister content of JesusSaid.org propaganda

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81 November 20th 2009 – United Nations' 'Universal Children's Day'.

82 It was an appeal that made its way to London, Cardiff and Belfast, too, and was funded as a secondary venture from the overspill of public donations gathered for the original 'Atheist Bus' idea.

83 Sherine spotted the JesusSaid.org buses in June, 2008. The 'Atheist Bus Campaign' was formally launched on 21st October, 2008, with the atheist buses appearing during January, 2009.

itself, launched a "positive counter-response" which quickly amassed ample funding to run an alternative message – "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life" – on as many as 800 buses across roads countrywide (Sherine, 2009, January 6).[84] With the 'there's probably no God' label stuck to their sides, the atheist buses carried Sherine's positively upbeat hopes that the campaign could challenge religious advertising that preys on "those who are vulnerable, frightening them into believing" and instead "reassure anyone who has been scared by this type of evangelism" (Sherine, 2008b, October 21; 2009, January 6). While she has perhaps forgotten to consider how diluted her reassuring message might appear to those people troubled if not traumatised by the possibility of there probably being *no* God, Sherine makes some valid points in justifying her campaigning strategy.

Ron Ferguson, believing that "the [bus] text cries out for scholarly exegesis," wrote a piece for the *Herald* on the topic. "I'm immediately drawn to the word 'probably'," he began:

> … I love it. The slogan is very English, vaguely Church of Englandy. The assumption lurking behind the slogan is that God is a tyrant, one you wouldn't like to meet on a dark night, or after you're deid, so if God doesn't exist, you can chill out and make merry. But this invitation to relax is fatally undermined by the qualifier 'probably'. If the deity 'probably' doesn't exist, it means that possibly he does (Ferguson, 2009, January 12).

So, as Ferguson has noted, the atheist buses have brought more than slogans onto streets; for those slogans have also permitted questions – questions of defining God in relation to divine ontological possibilities. Some deconstruction is required, and it is worth starting with the 'probably'. I, too, like the 'probably' even if, as Sherine explains (appeasing the concerns of more strident atheists), it was put in to suit the *Advertising Standards Agency* rather than offering the slightest concession to God (Sherine, 2008b, October 21). That aside, the politics and possibilities of the 'probably' are a nice reminder that ambiguities in theology (and atheistic a/theology) are often good things.

To paraphrase Ferguson's earlier line, it is a God that probably doesn't exist that allows for one that possibly does, and taking this further still we might say that if a tyrant God lurking in dark alleys probably doesn't exist then a safer God alternative possibly might. It is out of improbable possibilities that the questions of defining God

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[84] Interestingly enough, there were no 'Atheist Buses' in Edinburgh due to a clash of particularities between Lothian's bus fleet and the aesthetic format of the advert used (Donnelly, 2009, January 17).

come too, those potentials that allowed Ferguson to caricature the 'God' of atheist propaganda as something (or someone) entirely different – a more alluring and certainly less frightening 'God' that religions might sustain. Atheism, he suggests, is condemning a 'God' of its own making, fixing a certain divinity typology into a certain small closed-minded box with a lid fastened shut. But as Ferguson elaborates, the issue we have is that a religion's Sacred Texts invariably contain elements of the dodgy tyrannical God version; in other words, the Bible contains an awkward set of keys. He explains:

> Now most religious believers will want to argue that God isn't the tyrant depicted by the horsemen of the atheist apocalypse. There is a wee problem here, though. Parts of the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam make the deity look like an exponentially inflated version of Slobodan Milosevic. This is monotheistic religions' grizzly secret …
> (Ferguson, 2009, January 12).

Nonetheless, so long as grizzly-secret-gods are *understood* as potentially problematic, recognized and toiled with rather than locked away and abandoned, there are immense possibilities within religion for an out-of-the-box God far removed from his troublesome, troubling bad-God caricature.

As might be expected, Richard Dawkins maintained a high profile throughout the atheist bus endeavour and at one point made the following statement: "This campaign to put alternative slogans on London buses will make people think – and thinking is anathema to religion" (cited in Sherine, 2009, January 6). "Really?" responded Ferguson, fiercely: "Professor Dawkins needs to get out more. On buses, even" (Ferguson, 2009, January 12). If Dawkins were to take the unlikely step of starting the suggested road trip, he might visit those places of imagination in theological possibilities where, as Ferguson puts it, "theologians are adventurous artists who understand the evolutionary dimensions of religious tradition and play exhilarating and mid-stretching riffs on classical themes …" (Ferguson, 2009, January 12).[85]

As mentioned earlier in introducing Marcella, she is one of those "adventurous artists" whose analysis of theology's classical themes is central to the remaining chapters. In what she has written, Marcella never seems to doubt that there is a God, and there is no 'probably not' about this God's existence. There are, however, all those possibilities that emanate from Marcella's God of alternative guises; a God who is probably not

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[85] As John Caputo has also commented in a general sense, with respect to the situation more widely, "the word *theology* means for many philosophers a system or irrational and dogmatic beliefs that tolerates no dissent" (Caputo, 2006: 7).

decent but very possibly indecent and is certainly multiple in potential. To then turn full circle, it is a case of looking back to the 'Please Don't Label Me' billboards of the introduction in order to apply some labelling concerns to God definitions, and with questions principally concerned about possible theological options available for people and God through the chasm that can erupt between different versions of such God-concepts. The next part of this chapter (1.2) initiates a dialogue between Marcella and churchgoers that proceeds along similar themes.

1.2
Simply Starting with a Question: Who is God?

i.
Freedom Outside the Trains

But for whom do we think we do theology?
For God?
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2006b: 118)

Staying with the theme of public transport, but this time trains in Buenos Aires, Marcella recalls standing on a suburban platform where,

> … every day at a certain time there is a public announcement saying: 'The next passenger train is not for passengers'. It may seem as if part of a postmodern fictional plot … In reality they are for passengers, but of another class … In the chaotic life or a deteriorating world economy, not all the trains are for passengers, neither are all theologies for people (2006b: 116).

Characteristically bundling poverty, class, economics and theology together in a tight nexus in this Argentinian context, Marcella illustrates how people fit unequally into the social opportunities available to them. What interests me here is the way she connects the class analysis of this example to a theological one: "neither are all theologies for people," she explains.

It is not possible to fully understand Marcella's Indecent Theology orientation without first recognising the impact of colonial Christianity on the Latin American situation, together with her interpretation of the people subjected to it, for these factors are integral to it. Earlier, in the context of introducing her overall project, Indecent Theology's roots in Liberation Theology were described in terms of heritage and challenge. Liberation Theology's own challenge brought class analysis and an option for the poor to the colonial Christian legacy of the Militant churches, a legacy that infiltrated the Latin American context from the West.

Externally imposed, this form of Christianity was at great cost to the indigenous spiritualities, sexualities, economics and politics of Latin America, "a land which [already] had other religions, other cosmovisions and other traditions of being society and people" (2004a: 104) and which were forcibly stripped down to receive an imposed imperial ideology. "The fact is that," as Marcella noted, "Latin America is built upon the ashes of decomposing civilizations: traditional cosmologies and economic systems

which are still superimposed upon the Western ones" (1998a: 259). Recognising the deleterious impact the potent fusion of these unwarranted, unwanted ontological and epistemological paradigms might have on people's lives provided Marcella's interpretative motivation in many of the questions she asked.

The Militant Church regime of the Liberation Theology era was the one Marcella grew up under in Argentina, and the perspective she provides on its brutality is insightful: this was an environment where people were forced to "live in fear and suffered persecutions and violence due to their sexual and gender options" (2006c: 6). The milieu of colonial Christianity incorporated a heady political mix of Church and State; it also was "profoundly heterosexual," built upon "sexual indoctrination" that was fiercely guided by "strict gender codes applied across everyday life" effectively defining implicit rules of decency (1998a: 268; 2006c: 7-8).[86] Acknowledging such issues allowed Marcella to develop an understanding of theology as a corrupt science, one in which theologies are not always for people because theological ideologies are never entirely about people in the first place.

Liberation Theology's strong guiding principles – a self-conscious orientation to the poor, a struggle for justice and freedom, and a sturdy hermeneutics of suspicion – had righteous aims, but, in Marcella's analysis, these were diluted by colonial alliances.[87] Liberation Theology forgot the blinkers of its own blindness when it traded the potential of a true hermeneutics of suspicion (*i.e.* a reflexive self-critical one) for the safer conventions of its cultural context, a context which – as mentioned above – was riddled with heterosexually masculine gender codes.[88]

The implications of Liberation Theology's limited imagination had consequences for the 'people first' ideal of its initial orthopraxis: its tame constructions of 'people' involved the "naïve and simplistic" local peasant farmers who, faithfully and gratefully learning class analysis and conscientization processes alongside systematic-

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[86] An example of this, as Marcella relates it, would be how it is "manifested by the length of women's skirts, approved haircuts for men" (2006c: 7).

[87] While different to Marcella's development of it in her Indecent Theology project, theological readings of Latin American Liberation Theology's agenda (henceforth 'LALT') has often used Foucault's writings. For instance, Sharon Welch has similarly described LALT in such Foucauldian terms in her discussions, defining it as being "an insurrection of subjected knowledges and the manifestation of a new episteme" (Welch, 1985: 35).

[88] Marcella was clear in pointing out, nonetheless, that issues such as heterosexuality, misogyny, patriarchalism and so on also pre-dated the colonial invasion and were not entirely new (*i.e.* the Aztec culture) but she is keen to explain her belief that "the genderization of society and gods before Christianity was different and open to other possibilities" (2004a: 104).

style Christian standards from the 'popular (male) theologians' of the 'Basic Ecclesial Communities'(or 'BECs', 2000b: 63).[89] Hiding beneath the category of 'the poor' were all those people who fitted awkwardly into, and sometimes not at all within, the classificatory system Liberation Theology provided people with – a system which was roomy enough for "a factory worker, or a miner" (2003a: 2), or even his politely prayerful nuclear family wife (2005c: 4), but unable to accommodate much variant diversity from the standards of this safe standardized pattern. The idea that revolutionary insurgents, transgressive women or multiple sexualities were part of the 'poor' was off the liberationists' radar entirely: "Not only did 'the poor' subsume women, it also subsumed lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual people" (2000a: 30), Marcella explains. In this sense, Liberation Theology was replete with limits capable only of misrepresenting its 'people first' ideal, providing a place where:

> The Christ of the Basic Ecclesial Communities is depicted as embracing workmen with naked torsos but not women without underwear. The Virgin Mary can be portrayed as a poor peasant mother, but if I want to represent her as the poorest of the poor among women in my country, it would need to be not as a devoted mother, but rather as a child prostitute in the streets of Buenos Aires or Sao Paulo (1999: 41).

And a remedy for this could not be sought by experimental procedures involving simple alchemy, "as if just by adding the formula 'of the poor' was enough to produce any substantial structural or epistemological challenge" (2000a: 31).

A fixed and limited epistemology was responsible for the gap that developed "between uncontested ideologies and critical realities" that in Liberation Theology were "more about dogmas than about people" (2007b: 26, 29), and which, in the end, ruined its potential to offer the 'people first' theology of its original ideals. In becoming implicated in traditional systematic standards, Liberation Theology pushed people out in the process; its train was no longer for passengers. As Marcella has said:

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[89] 'Popular theologians' were as much figures of European market forces than a South American reality in Marcella's analysis, for, as she has pointed out, "in Europe, it was thought that there were thousands of popular theologians working with the poor – statistics that were obviously exaggerated" (2000e: 51). Some of Marcella's comments about the exploitative nature of market demands for LALT as a commodity are visceral: "the popular theologian became the intermediary of the free market society, the parasite who gave a 'voice to the voiceless' as if without his or her presence the poor could not speak," for instance (2000e: 43, *cf.* 2000e: 49; 2005d: 105).

> … to systematize was to make categories fit in the classical theological system, to make them decent. Theology of Liberation has been and still is a subversive theology, but not a transgressive one (1998a: 265).

Indecent Theology, on the other hand, is overtly transgressive on purpose and in style.

To summarise, for Marcella, Indecent Theology is a people-first theology of the first order, a theology that, unlike colonial Christianity and Liberation Theology, puts people before political progress and doctrinal standards, a theology that puts people (in all their multiple manifestations) first at all costs. Marcella's Indecent Theology is then understood as one that accommodates all possible versions of people and God, including all those who fail to fit the ideological constructions of acceptability normally expected of them. So, if trains are not for passengers and theologies are not for people unless decency is involved, then in this scheme 'God' (something of a textual container) is not for God either. So, it doesn't require a leap across the tracks to take this further, and Marcella has in fact done so implicitly in her petition for a revision of God possibilities in her Indecent Theology project. With trains not for passengers, theologies not for people, and God-versions not for God, perhaps it could be said that in an indecent 'people first' theological ideology God begins God's own deconstructive process unannounced.

With alterations to theological possibilities comes a potentially revisable God and a theo/logic that collapses rules to spin instead on 'people first' ideas of freedom. As Marcella once powerfully said:

> … freedom mobilizes me more than the concept of God. Freedom is the 'who' in the question 'Who is God?' for me. The reason is that I come from a country that has suffered from years of dictatorships. My first childhood memory is the bombing of my neighbourhood during a *coup d'etat*. Later, I remember the closing down of university faculties at gunpoint. During my youth, certain books were banned … Our everyday speech was censored and the State 'approved' certain words and condemned others (2000c: 31-32).

And certain decent words approved for (indecent) people and their God could never fit into possibilities provided by this sense of freedom. Marcella's early years, in her context of urban poverty and violence in the autocratic regime in Buenos Aires, created a value of freedom out of the fears she had known. It is hard to tell, but perhaps many others living under such a dictatorship similarly value freedom most of all. Where Marcella is original is in how her sense of freedom links to her idea of God, even fusing with it so that "freedom is the 'who' in the question 'Who is God?' for me" in the above passage.

It seems the possibilities for her God run far deeper than the colonial standard version that Christian expansionary politics could ever have envisaged.

Re-writing God is central to Indecent Theology, and Marcella's epistemological position carries within it a sense of permission that God-revisions are a good thing; and, as she has said: "we must engage in the process of writing about who God is from our own experience, in ways that reflect our communities and struggles without any mask of dishonesty" (2000c: 32). In other words, we must ask our own 'Who is God?' type questions.

'Who is God?' opens the analysis of the discursive fragments of the research project involving Edinburgh churchgoers upon which this thesis is based. The rest of 1.2 of this chapter draws upon some irruptive tensions between those discourses and some of Marcella's ideas discussed above, tensions that emerge out of a clash of paradigms: it notes a chasm arising between the highly academic, deeply theoretical nature of Marcella's Indecent Theology project and the rarely acknowledged insights of those churchgoers for whom all questions of God relate to an everyday Christian faith. In the midst of the tensions, in many ways it could be said that this is,

> … a work of crochet where people's own stories are linked with tentative stitches, in a movement of continuous searching for the unknown because not all our stories have had a voice in theology in the past (2000a: 132).

ii.
Churchgoers with Strange Enquiries

It is not the future of theologies that should be concerning us, but the future of real people
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2008b: 76)

"Who is God?" is a strangely intrusive question, a quixotic one that is much too short and simple. I am not sure how to answer it myself. What intrigued me most, when re-reading the sections of the interview transcripts in which this question featured, was noticing an evident sense of either surprise or unease in more than a few of them. Admittedly, some people felt able to provide an answer without much hesitation – but it is hard to say the extent to which those answers might have been programmatic cultural responses, ones conveying something of an unreflective standard 'God is'. More about this will be mentioned in chapter sections later, but, here, and for the time being, what seems more interesting is the hesitant and awkward replies to the "Who is God?" of my question.

Perhaps it is the kind of question that churches forget to ask, part of an implicit 'everybody knows discourse' that threatens to render it redundant. Yet, in responding to a question inquiring about the God that everybody knows, I noticed there is sometimes a sense of negation – for instance, in David, who started off with who God isn't first of all (C, 39: 768); and something of a sense of hesitancy: "I would say I don't know …" is how Angus began his answer (C, 72: 439). Margaret spoke of the impossible ambiguities of the question itself on account that her sense of God was fluid and had changed with the years (C, 15: 442); and Frances admitted, "I haven't really thought about it," in her reply (C, 153: 556). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of all in analysing aspects of this question involves a recognition of the number of people who repeated the question back at me, as if mulling it over to pause at the mystery of asking such a question like who God is in the first place.[90]

Of the various expressions of this unanticipated 'Who is God?' repetition format, I am particularly interested in Murdo's fuller expansion of this question. "Don't know! Who is God?" he began, continuing:

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[90] This is seen, for instance, in the examples of Ruby (C, 129: 342), Iris (C, 114: 747), Lily (C, 174: 475), Peter (C, 189: 353) and Murdo (C, 89: 366, and as also mentioned in this page and the next).

> Why do you … think it is important … to know who God is? I don't think it particularly matters, if you like, who God is. I think, you may think that's heretical, but I don't see it that way at all, I don't think there's a, a problem in … not answering directly who God is. I find that the outline of life set down in the scriptures, but particularly ennunciated by Jesus, is sufficiently comprehensive and sufficiently indicative for me not to be bothered about it (C, 89-90: 366-375).

For Murdo, it would seem, Christianity provides a 'way of life' that is of primary importance, and this way of life is accessed primarily through the Bible, rendering God-concepts essentially superfluous and nothing to worry about. It is not clear how unique his position on this is amongst churchgoers more generally, but my own assumption is that it is quite unique. After all, is churchgoing itself not principally about worshipping a divine being, Christianity's God and, in this sense, does it not involve something more than a philosophical social system providing guidance for good living? Murdo's recognition of the primary role of the Bible in detailing the "outline of life" he chooses to follow as a Christian is, nonetheless, significantly important in analysing his rejection of the need for any 'who God is' epistemology – for perhaps the Bible has in some way taken on a divine role in Murdo's churchgoing in itself.

To relate back to Marcella's 'God is freedom' ideal detailed above, it is perhaps worth considering the critical difference between a wildly unorthodox and imaginative God-figure and Murdo's biblical guidance ideology; despite her creative moves to rewrite God, God for Marcella is still an 'is' whereas for Murdo all that *is* that really matters is in the Bible itself. For Marcella, asking 'Who is God?' is a vital question at every theological juncture and yet for Murdo it is one that stands peripheral to the things that really matters in life in the end.

Murdo was quite forthright and lucid in his answer to the 'Who is God?' question, and in this he was fairly unusual. In the transcripts of some other interviews, I found a greater degree of vagueness and I suggest that this vagueness belies something of the limits and difficulties people may find when asked what they think about God. As an example, Frances conveys a sense of this in saying "I haven't really thought about it," before continuing to say:

> … I don't know … I do feel that there is a God up there who guides us, guides all of us … that we look up to, that I talk to. You ask for help … divine intervention we all need, you know … I can't say I've thought about it a lot, other than that there is 'a God', that we have been given guidance in life, how we interpret it, and how we live our lives is between us and our

> conscience and God, this higher being, who one day we will be answerable to. I suppose, I have a feeling of that, but I can't say I've ever put it into words before. I've never put that into words, it's not something that I 've really thought about ... (C, 153: 556-566).

Despite their different analyses, Murdo, like Frances, also thinks there "is 'a God'," but for him it seems clear that effort expended on thinking about who this God might be is misguided. In contrast, for Frances, knowledge of God is something not yet really thought through and so not fully able to be articulated. In other words, for Frances (and several others, too) there is something about the God-ness of God that inherently constrains endeavours to define and describe him, a God who – by nature of his God-ness – is ultimately beyond our analytic attempts of understanding anyway. After all, as Cathie has said, "he wouldn't be God if we could actually give voice to him in our language … because he'd be limited to what we could say and he's not, he's outside everything that we can do" (C, 278: 573-575). Ruby conveys something similar:

> Mhmm. The problem is that nobody can hope to describe him. How can somebody who is all present, you know, present in the lives in everybody, possibly be capable of complete description? (C, 130: 369-371).

Furthermore, at the end of the day, struggling with any 'Who is God?'-type question is "not God's problem" but ours, anyway, as Samuel has said (C, 257: 736).

For Marcella, however, the problem of defining God is very much God's problem, too. Indecent Theology contains a pervasive, persuasive thematic that God is also a casualty of our God-definitions, and that God is trapped in the Church closet of decency waiting for release. Re-working the possibilities of divinity is a must for justice to be realised. The implicit tension between Marcella's strong concern for God's liberation and Samuel's statement that all these definitional qualms are really nothing at all to do with God in the end (and definitely "not God's problem") is an unnerving one. Marcella's God is illegitimately contained by cultural forces conditioning who God can be, yet the God of churchgoers apparently seems to be a different entity entirely.

The tension is a tricky one to deal with. I suggest that it comes down to an issue of revisability possibilities. Indecent Theology actively encourages a revisable God from a people-first epistemology. Churchgoers, however, neither see the necessity nor know the possibilities of a revisable God. At this stage of the analysis, perhaps they might even question whether Marcella's urge to free God from a closet of decency has any point. Marcella, on the other hand, appears hugely sanguine that ordinary people think

along lines just like her. Personally, I am far from convinced they do. Her style was very focused, definite, creatively subversive and assuredly optimistic and Indecent Theology itself is a deeply hopeful scheme as a theological heuristic in its own right. Marcella in her writing is sure that the potential possibilities of Indecent Theology can address the necessity of releasing God from God's systematic closet, and is convinced that those at the grassroots (including a prisoner-God similarly located) recognise the problem and are ready to start the revolution. But, as mentioned earlier, Marcella's questioning style never really found much space outside her own academic milieu to ask churchgoers whether what she assumed they might think was anywhere close to reality. If Indecent Theology provides a guiding beacon through the damaged wreckage of decency systems, it could be the case that churchgoers have already switched off their radar entirely and gone indoors.

iii.
Applying Concepts to God-thoughts

An Indecent Theology using deviancy as a methodological course would have a better chance of challenging the accepted which is at the root of the power which control and dehumanise people's lives
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000a: 194)

With an eclectic collection of images scattered over the table in a discussion centred on depictions of God, Sandy, a focus group participant, interjected to say: "I don't actually have a concept of God in, in a physical sense" (B, 114: 1234). Continuing, he explained:

> And I know some people will be praying to an old chap with a beard or whatever, it may be their concept, I actually don't have that and I couldn't think myself into that situation. I think God is just so far above my thinking that there ain't no way I can know what he looks like (B, 114-115: 1235-1238).

From an analytic perspective, I am interested in Sandy's phrase – "what he looks like" – for it leads to important questions about what a 'concept' is, sharply conveying in this particular example the variance between conceptualising God in an ideographic format (i.e. Sandy's struggles with a pictorial image of a "physical" God) and a more wordy and effusive ideology about who God might be. It would seem there is a dualism at work here – for, in the midst of professing no knowledge of what God can look like, Sandy's "old chap with a beard" voluntarily provides an image of God that is brought into the conversation from the subterranean image reserves already within his mind. It may be a stereotype, and Sandy clearly underlines his awareness that this is the case. Notwithstanding, this does not detract from the fact that an image of God (this one in particular) was already there, ready and waiting, to come to mind unannounced.

As Sandy's statement reveals, concepts work multiply and at many levels, and they often exist in tension with themselves. Moving onto another focus group, an interesting dialogue between two participants – Hamish and Fiona – arose along related lines:

Hamish

> But, word pictures, word pictures; it's all about word pictures, and what helps us conjure up an image or something, or even an idea, is useful. That's why the Lord's prayer is still meaningful, because we're not literally thinking in terms of, of course, some people do think in terms of God up there]//A man with a long grey beard.

Fiona

> //[A beard, yeah. That's a childhood image and I suspect probably that is, if I were pushed, that is probably how I would picture him now. But it's not, it's only because it is such a strong image from my childhood. But it's not me acknowledging that he's a man and therefore men are more valuable than women. However, it's not me following all that gender discrimination argument, that isn't in it for me. But it quite clearly is for some people (B, 26: 751-762).

Here, I have kept the linguistic markers in place between the turn-taking in this dialogue because they are important signs in themselves, conveying something of how quickly the "God up there" of Hamish's words became "A beard, yes" in Fiona in an instant, even before Hamish has time to finish things off with "A man with a long grey beard". The shifts are subtle, but perhaps this signifies that a bearded-man-God caricature is well instilled in the cultural memory of western Christianity. This 'grandfather-God' (a phrase used here as a blanket term for such portrayals) is somewhere deep, hidden, a bit embarrassing maybe, but lurks still – and at some level, is perhaps the one that our minds link to first.

I am doubly interested in this particular dialogue between Hamish and Fiona for the way in which Fiona's admission and then qualification of the God-concept she imagined played out. It seemed important for her, after bringing in a grandfather-God image, to make it clear to the rest of the group: firstly, she suggested she thought this because it was so deeply embedded from childhood; and, secondly, despite the conceptualisation she articulated, she wanted to ensure that, in saying this, she still believed in gender equality. Fiona was far from alone in mentioning a childhood link to a grandfather-God, and, returning to the analysis of Sandy's statement above, it could be suggested that this conveys something of the pervasive style of such God-image caricatures appearing in contemporary culture.

Encapsulating a sense of how pervasively the childhood concept is lodged in our imagination, Margaret suggests that "as a child I'm sure we all think of God as male and rather old" (C, 16: 449). In that sense, it would probably be no surprise for Margaret to hear, for instance, Frances' words – "I suppose my picture of God is a picture of my childhood, you know, the man with the beard and sitting up in heaven" (C, 153: 573-574), nor even Emma's more complex childhood memory: "I think it goes back to that Bible that I – you know, with the illustrations – that I read as a child. So, late-middle-aged, white hair, beard, white robes" (C, 55: 355-357).

This quotation from Emma, which is part of a wider conversation in which she discussed with me her memories of a large illustrated family Bible (as something that will again be mentioned later in chapter 2), reveals not only the pervasive nature of the grandfather-God image more generally but also how evidently it can feature as a lingering memory attached to a specific thing. Perhaps this is a God-concept etched just as strongly into Emma's hefty biblical tome as into consciousness itself, for, as Ruby acknowledged elsewhere with a degree of clarity, if not an implicit sigh: "I know what my mental picture of him is, which is rather more of the sort of grand old man, I suppose" (C, 129: 342-343).

Just as in the case of Sandy in the focus group at the opening of this section, who ably illustrated a grandfather-God in the midst of rejecting it, David in an interview likewise said: "I don't imagine him as that sort of man on a sort of fluffy cloud … God as a man with a beard" (C, 39: 768-769, 772). God's beard has lived in the imagination for a while, and even those fluffy clouds of David's phrase were included in Michelangelo's iconic painting, *The Creation of Adam,* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. *The Creation of Adam* is perhaps the most well-known 'God' of the Western world, and it was for this reason that I chose to include it in the research questionnaires issued to Edinburgh churches (*cf.* App. D, Qn9). In this question, respondents were first invited to express their familiarity with this painting, and the majority of those who answered this question acknowledged that this was the case (even though, crucially, only a fragment of it – just the touching fingers alone – were shown).

The second half of the question involved a line on which respondents were asked to plot the position in alliance with how well Michelangelo's God depiction fitted with their conceptualisation of God (within a spectrum running from 'Very close' to 'Not at all close'). More people placed their position nearer the 'Not at all close' end of the spectrum. Questionnaires, of course, have their limits – and it is not possible to evaluate, beyond general assumptions, which factors could have contributed to what the majority plotting styles might have inferred. For instance, it could equally be an aversion to the particular Italian classical painterly style, its renaissance milieu, the austere drama of the image itself as well as a rejection of this type of (muscular and stern) grandfather-God concept that is at work.[91] Yet, I am still intrigued by the balance this question's

[91] An example of an aversion on the grounds of artistic merit is found in a focus group discussion, with Janet saying: "So, well, I shouldn't say funny, but, you know, there's God

results suggest – illustrating a sense that, while a significant number placed themselves nearer the 'Very close' end of the scale, there were many who imagined God as more than this image concept contained.[92] As conjecture, I nonetheless wonder whether a certain slippage from a grandfather-God (Michelangelo style) to a more amenably acceptable and approachable 'Father God' concept might be at work in this questionnaire example.

God as Father is the prevalent standard of God conceptualisation among churchgoers overall, inclusive of those in this project but also, more generally, in wider Christian culture itself. God and Father is expressed succinctly by Anita, he is "my Father, my heavenly Father" (C, 315: 443); with liturgical allusions by Iris, "God is our Father in heaven, he's the Father of Jesus Christ who came to Earth and suffered for us, he is the all-supreme being" (C, 114: 747-748);[93] and with more familiarity as "my dad" in Pete's words (B, 142: 795). Sometimes the father-God concept is mixed up with the ideas of our earlier analysis – for instance, the merging all at once of "the best of uncles, the best of fathers, the best of grandfathers" (C, 189: 354-355) into the God of Peter's illustration.

With great enthusiasm, Cathie expressed her idea of God to me as "Father, God, Husband, Provider, Lover, he's everything," an overall "nice person" (C, 277: 551-552; C, 266: 136): "He is awesome, he is my Father, he is the one who loves me, who created me, who made me, who knows me better than anybody else in the world. He is

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with his long beard, and Jesus with his hand piously raised up like that and God's holding the Alpha and Omega and there's the Holy Spirit over them, and it's got, it's got all the right, you feel that he's included in the painting all the right things … for his time" (B, 74: 1125-1128).

[92] It is a tangential though interesting point that men were more likely to choose positions towards 'Not at all close' while more women opted for points nearer 'Very close' (App. D, Qn9).

[93] There are many more examples of how churchgoers defined God in a 'standard version,' and, while there is no room to provide a lengthy analysis of these in the text itself, a few statements here help to convey a sense of this:

> **Lily** - "He's the maker of the world, maker of mankind, humankind if you want to use that expression. His, he, he sent his Son Jesus and he sent the Holy Spirit. So there's three, you know, he's the triune God, triune God. And he's not only a God of, he's not only a Maker, he's Creator. He's a, is a God of love but he's also a God of judgment, I think that's something people forget" (C, 174-175: 475-479);
> **Julie** - "God is a being, creator, all-powerful, all-knowing … loving, God is love. He is the sustainer of life, he's the giver of every good gift that we have … he is … how can I go on? He's, he's the Father of Jesus and yet he's part of the Trinity as well - there's the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He's a judge, he's a friend, he's …. Just it's almost too vast to explain." (C, 231: 495-499);
> **Anita** - "I see God as my Father, and Jesus as my Saviour and Friend, and the Holy Spirit, the Spirit there to guide me and it's, yes it's complicated …" (C, 316: 467-469).

the love of my life" (C, 277: 543-545). Earlier in the interview, in an introductory section in which she discussed her background, Cathie spoke of God in very human terms. She explained:

> My mum and dad had divorced, so my dad wasn't around a lot of the time … [and] I had no actual fatherhead in the family. So I suppose God the Father just slipped in there very easily, you know. There was a vacant space to let and he took, he took it (C, 266-267: 145-146, 149-151).

Her comments here are illuminating, because in deconstructing the lines between human and divine there is also a subtle act of knitting happening between a human-male and a male-God amidst the threads of her explanation. Clearly, though, for Cathie to make the connections she has done here it would seem fair to say that in her understanding God is not only a male figure of terminological rhetoric but ontologically male in his being as well, and as one understood to be very definite and implicitly human.

Like many in describing God, Emma started off with conventional terms – "An omnipotent Being …" and so on – before letting God's standardization slip into a more openly compassionate outlook, one through which she could explain that "people are often too busy or too focused on other things to really see God in everything, but I think God is everywhere … you know, in the person, in the beggar in the street" (C, 55: 348-350). And in this, there is almost something of an Indecent Theology happening in Emma's words, through her possibilities sensed around options for God-versions.

This introductory chapter asks 'Who is God?' in a variety of guises, from the tyrant-God of the Atheist Buses, to Marcella's 'God is freedom' ideal; from the irrelevance, ambiguity and reticence of some articulations of God, to the very definite biblical father-God concepts of others involved in the research project; where Liberation Theology and colonial Christianity, together with Indecent Theology and a 'people first' ideology have crept in along the way; and also a chapter which reveals a forceful tension between Marcella's optimism in God-revisionary potential and churchgoers' reality, therein bringing a tension that I am suggesting seems to look as strong as a paradigm shift.

A central element of Indecent Theology involves Marcella's conviction that not only justice must be done, but that justice must be done not just for people but for God, too. For Marcella, God is just as severely damaged as people by powerful gender and sexual ideologies, and by means of a suitably indecent rescue package her work

drove all her efforts towards attempts of saving God from toxic theologies that threatened to entrap whoever-God-might-be: "God is the first casualty in theology if God becomes a puppet of heterosexual ideologies," she believed (2002b: 90), and in her work, God's trauma is clearly evident.

The difficulty, however, is that churchgoers – in coming from an alternative position other than Indecent Theology's – perhaps see the God-concept problematic entirely differently than Marcella did. Indeed, for churchgoers, doing justice for God might involve papering over the threatening cracks of theological alternatives and undertaking everything contrary to what Indecent Theology stands for. It is an impossibility from which the argument of this thesis must begin, and, in it, those elements of churchgoers' fatherly-God ideas already made evident in this section of chapter 1, is again to be found in the other chapters to come.

For instance, on several occasions, research participants linked their ideas of God to their understanding of God's self-articulation within the Bible's pages, via an ideology that the biblical God-depiction actually conveys the voice of God: "God is God. God is who he says he is," in Deirdre's words (C, 298: 574-575), and this will be discussed further in chapter 2 where the crucial role of the Bible is made prominent. The next chapter is followed, in chapter 3, by analysing such conceptualisations in terms of God's heterosexual masculinity; so, if for Samuel the Bible is the place where "God talks about fatherly things" (C, 257: 750), realising that "the Bible uses male language" (C, 258: 756) is an important issue to be further analysed in this chapter. Before concluding the current chapter, however, a deconstructive reading of the seemingly impossible issues found in chapter 1's earlier sections further helps to situate the Derridean elements made present in each of the rest.

1.3
Deconstructing Divinity's Impossible Implications

Let us not anticipate a simple response
to such a question
Jacques Derrida (2001a: 3)

Like indecency itself, deconstruction is no "negative exercise" as Marcella has pointed out (2005c: 2). Both live in comparable trajectories; they each sit waiting on similar platforms, and get on the same train. The travelling concepts of train station analogies, which earlier began with Marcella waiting for trains not for passengers and theologies not for people, persist with an uncanny ring in some words of Jacques Derrida's. "If only you know," Derrida has begun:

> … how independent deconstruction is, how alone, as alone, all alone! And as if it has been abandoned, right in the middle of a colloquium, on a train platform … of leaving for I know not what destination …
> (Derrida, 2000: 282).

The leaving and arriving, the waiting and going, and the movement between both, are part of a rhythmic style of writing a thesis like this where the questions are found in the tensions between possibilities throughout. At beginnings and endings, from departing to alighting, questions of possibilities (and, impossibly, the open capacity of those forever limited possibilities) riddle through it with clickety-clacks to placeless non-destinations.[94] In the following chapters, and starting with this one, destination markers for deconstructive potentialities offer concluding thoughts on the thematic topics of each: while momentarily reminiscing on a platform station soon to be left behind, they are also always looking ahead to places to come, steadily journaling onwards to the next.

The question of this initial chapter has proceeded along discussions of a single question, the one which asks 'Who is God?' – and in the asking seems to appear the simplest of question to evoke such difficult answers. What this word 'God' might mean

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[94] As made reference to in the preface, in deconstructive thought "impossibility is not a possibility that I cannot access" in a straightforward conventional sense but rather is a term for those forever unreachable things of an alternative realm entirely that will never be complete or finished, such as justice and hospitality, because they are perpetually limitless aims and visions (Deutscher, 2005: 74). In conveying this with regards to justice, Derrida has said: "If anything is undeconstructible, it is justice. The law is deconstructible, fortunately: it is infinitely perfectible. I am tempted to regard justice as the best word, today, for what refuses to yield to deconstruction, that is to say, for what sets deconstruction in motion, what justifies it" (Derrida, 2006 [1993]: 543).

can never be straightforward; what that tight trinity of short terms, what the Who-is-God (or Who/is/God or God-Who or is-God *etc.*) constitute, conveys the potentialities of the textual place of *différance* – of its fluid difference and deferral dynamism, elaborated earlier in introductory pages – that more than energises, but entirely enables, deconstruction. *Différance* forever troubles those "simplistic, traditional notions of reference" that are so easily assuring with aplomb (Stocker, 2006: 62).[95] But back to the trains; and, in *Confessions and Circumfession*, Derrida has himself conveyed some of the tricky elements of the 'God' term (Derrida, 2005b). Beginning with a now familiar analogy to this current chapter, he starts by saying, "When I say 'I have a train to catch,' I'm not quoting, I'm not mentioning, I'm using the word 'I'. But in the structure of the statement you don't have rigorous criteria to distinguish between mentioning and using" (Derrida, 2005b: 39). And then he continues at length:

> I think that, in the case of God, it's more than ever the case that it's impossible to distinguish between mentioning and using. If you are a radical atheist, and you just mention the word *God*, that means that you are supposed to understand what the word means, that you inherit the word in a culture that you are raised in, a culture in which the word *God* means something. For me, even if I say God doesn't exist, I would immediately say the opposite. God exists to the extent that people believe in God. There has been a history, and there are religions. For me, religions are the proof that God exists, even if God doesn't exist. That's the question (Derrida, 2005b: 39).

That is the question, and it is a summary which conveniently (and coincidentally) allows Derrida to ask his own 'Who is God?' question from afar; his thoughts agitating the ambiguities of all such appeals that appear to make definite claims about who God might be. Recalling the problematic 'probably' of the Atheist Bus Campaign caption, could Derrida be seen writing onto and through, into and over his thoughts on God by a similarly enigmatic 'probably' that continually – irrevocably – opens up any debate. He continues in his explanation of God by saying that:

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[95] This is, if course, the reason why *différance* is – as frequently referenced as – a "notoriously unpindownable concept" in its own right (Currie, 2004: 45). In reference specifically to writing about Derrida's understanding of the connection between the terms 'God' and '*différance*', Kevin Hart has usefully summarised how these alternative concepts function:

> All concepts, and hence all meaning, are a function of *différance* and this obviously holds true for the concept of God … It is plainly clear, however, that God cannot be an effect of *différance*: although it sounds far less dramatic, what Derrida can only mean is that the *concept* of God is an effect of the trace. The deconstruction of theism will show, consequently, that 'God', as used at any point and time of history, is a construction (Hart, 2000: 37).

> Even if I were able to demonstrate, against all the canonical proofs of the existence of God, that God doesn't exist, it wouldn't demonstrate that God doesn't exist, because religions exist, because people believe in God. They behave and organize their lives according to this belief … That's God's existence to me … That's God (Derrida, 2005b: 39).

That God of Derrida's 'That's God' statement is also the questioned, questionable, questioning God running insistently through the spaces of the remaining chapters: a God known through the dialogic differences between Marcella and churchgoers, and a God traced through the tensions between both.[96]

But any 'God' – much like every other possible conceptual term in deconstruction thought – refers to no ontological presence in extra-textual reality for in *différance* it cannot; no entity (not even a divine one) has a place outside the endlessly disseminating flux of *différance*. And it is *because* of the trace – because of its perpetual commitment to an impossible pure presence – that God can be read alternatively through the ideas deconstructed here.[97] John Caputo has captured the role *différance* conveys in providing a vital option for theology in saying that it is "neither divine nor human, theistic nor atheistic, mortal nor immortal, but the conditions under which it is possible to speak and think about such things" (Caputo in Wolfreys, 2004: 121). Never about "destruction or demolition," deconstruction is always on a foraging path of *différance* "realising and responding, of listening and opening up" through a forest of traces, seeking out spaces and finding the gaps (Caputo, 1997b: 57).

These gaps are everywhere (while still nowhere), nothing (and yet everything), fully alive with the possibilities of alterity yet strangely still empty; they are endlessly

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[96] Derrida's conceptual use of the 'trace' in *différance* is important insofar as traces leave marks that differ and defer any attempt at a fixed presence. This deconstructive idea is summarised by Catherine Belsley, who has said that: "If the trace of the other in the selfsame is the condition of the possibility of meaning, it follows that meaning is never pure, never absolute. Inevitably invaded by what it sets out to exclude, any proposition is shadowed by its differentiating other" (Belsey, 2002b: 118).

[97] Geoffrey Bennington usefully summarises the importance of the trace in relation to metaphysics, by saying: "Presence would be that there be no difference, no referral, no trace. Which is impossible. So presence would not be were there no difference, no referral, or trace. Presence is made possible by the trace, which makes pure presence impossible: each present moment is essentially constituted by its retention of a trace or a past moment" (Bennington, in McQuillan, 2006: 218) In other words, anything that could be considered 'present' mark the traces of everything absent to it (Deutscher, 2005: 30).

enigmatic, and, in Sean Gaston's imagination, the gaps dance, "wandering, digressing, swerving, stepping aside from ontology" (Gaston, 2006: 113).[98]

Remembering the Sistine Chapel discussion in the preceding section of this chapter, with its gap reaching between the meeting of God and Adam, an ancient trace painted across the pigmented ceiling, the dynamic fingers that nearly touch across the space – but the gap remains. "We are always trying to close the gap, and with God most of all," as Gaston has said (Gaston, 2006: 119), but perhaps finding impossibilities amidst open gaps are far from failure.[99] The gaps must remain to reignite potential, to resist closure and prevent easy conclusions. After all, "were the horizon of possibility to close over, it would erase the trace of justice, for justice is the trace of what is to come beyond the possible" (Caputo, 1997a: *xxiv*); and impossible justice for people and for God is the central issue of this investigation.

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[98] This 'stepping aside from ontology' is marked, as Gaston says paraphrasing Derrida, by "the gaps of space becoming time and of time becoming space, the gaps *of différance* and *as différance* – *différance* always leaves a gap" (Gaston, 2006: 10).

[99] To continue Gaston's thoughts on this idea whereby "it is only the gap as the *possibility* of contact that prevents touch becoming intuition" (Gaston, 2006: 113), he has underlined the need to "always be vigilant when it comes to the proclamation of a gap, and with *the* gap (the absence) *of* or *as* God most of all," and this is because "it is a question of a gap that invariably reconfirms a world without gaps, an onto-theology" (Gaston, 2006: 114).

2

Troubling Texts: Critically Contextual Bible Studies

A sacred text, if there is such a thing, is a text that does not await the question of whether or not it is necessary that there be such a thing: if there is a sacred text, then there is a sacred text. You are wondering whether or not the sacred text is necessary: this is a question which that text couldn't care less about.
The sacred text happens, it is an event

Jacques Derrida (1985: 147)

Between solid book, sacred text, pages bound in vellum, and toilet paper or waste paper, paper slips and flutters between the safe, secure, permanent and inviolable and that which can be so easily torn, discarded, thrown away

Yvonne Sherwood (2010: 11)

But metaphors are texts in miniature …

Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000a: 176)

… the Bible confronts us with so many scenes of transgression that might be read as 'unforgiveable'

Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2004: 296)

The Bible, of all books, is the most dangerous one

Mieke Bal (cited in Aichele *et al*: 272)

Professor Daly …don't you realize that where myths are concerned the medium is the message? Don't you ever see that the efforts of biblical scholars to reinterpret texts … cannot change the overwhelming patriarchal character of the biblical tradition?

Mary Daly, addressing herself (1985: 21)

There has been an apparently unquestioned assumption that the Bible is central, normative and privileged in our lives as Christians … I simply want to place a question-mark, to interrogate the apparently obvious, to highlight some of the problems in leaving that assumption unchallenged …

Lesley Orr (2005: 3)

2.1
Of Stamps and Scribbles

Of course, people will be offended, others outraged
– this, after all, is the text by which
they live their lives. Yet … it's merely
a receptacle for a lots of words …
Stephen McGinty (2009, August 1)

Sometime later this year, and at public request, Royal Mail will launch a commemorative postage stamp collection to mark the 400th anniversary of the publication of the Authorised, or King James, Version of the Bible.[100] Still too early to announce image content of the new stamps-to-be, avid philatelists and others with an eidetic memory for such things might recall that King James 1st is no newcomer to the stamp-world: He made an earlier millennial appearance in Royal Mail's Christmas collection at the end of 1999, on a stamp by Scottish illustrator Clare Melinsky (BPMA, 2010). Fittingly on a background of starry skies, Melinsky placed a woodcut style King James with an exaggeratedly disproportionate left index finger – austere and cartoonish at once – beside his supersized Bible, pointing at the open pages of bold black (and otherwise empty and text-free) lines. There is an apparant contradiction of King James and his text-free Bible, of his strong index-finger injunction to read from pages emptied of content by the blunt limits of Melinsky's lino-cutting technique.

Perhaps it is possible to venture imaginatively ahead of the release of the new stamp collection; to think forward to the possibilities of Bible stamps which are not text-free, but rather miniature text messages franked and folded as travelling concepts stuck to everyday mail dropped ubiquitously through ordinary letterboxes. Unlike Melinsky's woodcut-style, text-free Bible (of object value and empty of content, which might be called a 'material Bible'), the new stamps-to-be of imaginative forays could be text-filled (in a very miniature way); holding content value, these newly imagined ones could thus convey 'biblical material' to use a contrasting phrase.

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[100] As lauded as this Bible stamp enterprise is in *The Christian Institute's* website, apparently driven by "numerous requests from members of the general public" (CI, 2010), it would seem it also falls squarely within a more general cultural focus on the merits of the KJV Bible in 2011; as such, it appears to be less about a Bible stamp collection *per se* and more about accessorising the KJVB for its important anniversary with yet another venture.

Beyond the level of stamp-collecting, the material Bible – the book as an object – has made controversial incursions of its own recently into Scotland's contemporary art scene. In 2009, a couple of students from Glasgow School of Art, Craig Little and Blake Whitehead (who label themselves the collective 'Littlewhitehead'), decided on an installation for a fundraising auction at a Glasgow's McLellan Galleries: They deep-fried a Bible to chip-shop standards, and not just any old Bible but an eBay-sourced 200-year-old King James Version at that (Murray, 2009, December 6). Now, the concept of deep-frying far more than fish is hardly novel in Scotland, but the idea of melting an antique Bible in polycarbons and trans-fats before encasing it in vaccum plastic could be considered a new thing.[101] In response to what the Church, via the media, was calling a cheap and gimmicky publicity stunt a best and "act of desecration" at worst (Murray, 2009, December 6), Littlewhitehead defended their installation against the slight furore that ensued by outlining the theory behind their artwork: "The Bible and the batter are two quintessentially Glaswegian things," they said, elaborating how deep-frying a Bible offered a contemporary artistic cultural illustration of Glasgow's divided history of religious bigotry and decidedly unhealthy dietary symptoms (Murray, 2009, December 6).

The state the text, the biblical material, might have got into as a result of the Littlewhiteheadian deep-frying technique is open to question, though it could be assumed a Bible might emerge dripping from chip-shop vats a little worse for wear. But, like Melinsky's text-free stamp-version, this is an object Bible, one in which its materiality – its symbolism – is all that matters. Its text is superfluous to the cause. The question of bifurcating a 'Bible' into the dual realms of material Bible and biblical material is critical to understanding the argument of this chapter, and it is with a final illustration of another Glasgow Bible in which word and object values congeal that extends this idea most of all.

It is worth starting near the end of this story, with the mythological sleeping beauty quality of a Bible (another KJV, but not the antique kind) locked in a glass case, open for viewing but enclosed from touching, mute and unmoveable in its dormancy. The glass-case-Bible was displayed in Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in

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[101] Firmly lodged in the cultural imagination of Scotland is that culinary experience of the "deep-fried Mars bar," which is now so well installed in the country's culture that it holds a Wikipedia entry, together with a feature from the medical journal, *The Lancet* (*cf.* "Deep-fried Mars bar" in bibliography).

2009, carrying the eponymous title 'Untitled 2009', as part of a subsidiary display section named 'Made in God's Image' within the larger temporary exhibition, 'sh[OUT]: Contemporary Art and Human Rights'.[102] This Bible belonged to the Metropolitan Community Church, and its place was designed for the GoMA installation by MCC minister, Rev. Jane Clarke.[103] Enclosed in perspex, the sleeping-beauty-Bible as an object (admittedly not entirely text-free and contentless with two of its pages selected for open viewing) exists on the same paradigm as Melinksy's miniature-stamp version and also Littlewhiteheadian deep-fried one as well.

The sleeping-beauty-Bible story starts quickly to unravel with the absence of a narrative of wicked women, sharp spindles and poison apples ready to encase it in glass; on the contrary, the glass-case of the GoMA Bible transpires to be the point of release rather than entrapment. The Bible is not freed from its mute casket by someone handsome, but safely placed within it for protective preservation. Being a gallery exhibit, this might not seem such an unusual venture, to place the treasured Bible in a glass case – unless, of course, the act of placing it in it threatened to destroy what it was supposed to mean in the first place.

Understanding this further involves conducting a history of the GoMA Bible in a few hundred words, starting in reverse by beginning with its casket, a pot of pens and some loose-leaf sheets inviting comments. Accompanying those scattered scraps around the glass-case-Bible were some gallery minders with the job of routinely gathering up any written notes left behind for the Bible, and later moderating those for possible insertion into it at another time (*cf.* Sherwood, 2010: 9). The encased and untouchable, hardly readable, public object 9-to-5-style Bible transmogrifies into the openly readable and fragmentarily insertable virtual reality one accessed by the gallery's curatorial staff strictly after-hours.

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102 As implicitly indicated in the main title, sh[OUT], the overall theme related primarily to issues of LGBTI sexualities. The venture was organised by Glasgow's council-funded arts body, Culture and Sport Scotland [Museums], which biennially holds special exhibits and events on issues of social justice, gender inclusion and sexual awareness.

103 Metropolitan Community Churches are inclusive in outlook on issues of sexuality, welcome people regardless of their sexual orientation or preferences, and believe firmly that in Christianity there is a place for every person in the love of God. Believing in the principle tenets of Christianity, the MCC also locate themselves within the mainstream Church rather than considering themselves a separate sect outside of it; *cf.* "Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC)" (2009), which is an accessible website holding such statements of beliefs and values.

The gallery's point of artificial loose-leaf insertion pursuits was an assiduous damage-reduction exercise related to attempts to stymie what Charlotte Higgins from the *Guardian* called a "tremendous kerfuffle" that the original exhibition caused (Higgins, 2009, September 23).[104] This kerfuffle found its way into many media outlets, some international, issuing reactionary reports that "bristled with the frisson of illegality" at what had been done (Sherwood, 2010: 3). A Kirk spokesperson decried it as a "sacrilegious act" (Wade, 2009, July 23); the Pope's adviser called it "disgusting and offensive" (Grant, 2009, July 28);[105] ordinary people wrote letters and waved placards (McAlpine, 2009, August 2); and a general sense of great outrage and scandal was noted by anyone wishing to make comment on the thing.

Reading in reverse and noticing the outrage first, it may seem like a terribly offensive atrocity had occurred in GoMA's sh[OUT] exhibition last year. But in fact, it began fairly innocently with Jane Clarke's very simple message of invitation to her conceptual Bible, the glass-case-Bible that originally began as an open book: "If you feel you have been excluded from the Bible, please write your way back into it," was its original tagline, one which asked for actual writing, encouraged a written response, onto and into its biblical material. Alongside stood another (far from inconsequential) pot of pens. It was this open invitation which, as Yvonne Sherwood (herself a one-time gallery visitor to the Bible *in situ*) summarises:

> … hardly surprisingly, unleashed a flood-tide of responses. Some seemed to express the passion of years of grappling with Christian and post-Christian identities. Others seemed to be produced with a casual flick of the pen in response to the irresistible phenomenon of an authority figure offering itself up for public immolation. There were affirmatory proclamations: 'Queer, Christian and proud'. There were carnivalesque subversions of authority such as 'The Gospel according to Luke Skywalker' and counterstatements of alternative beliefs such as 'I believe in coincidence'. There were strident protest statements against the Bible's gender politics or theo-politics: 'Everyone is a person, no matter what. I don't want a Fascist God'; and 'This is all sexist pish, so disregard it all'. There were expressions of disappointment

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104 This "tremendous kerfuffle" was marked by a deluge of letter, email, and phone-call complaints, some persistent and others international, addressed to staff members at GoMA and CSG[M]. However, as a couple of newspapers pointed out, the large majority of vitriolic objections related to comments made by people who responded to the exhibit by hearsay rather than seeing it in person in Glasgow (MacDonald, 2009, August 2; Reid, 2010, January 22).

105 In particular, the Pope's adviser was keen to note in his riposte the critical fact that (as he described it) "this would not happen to the Koran" (cited in Grant, 2009, July 28) a point which was subsequently mirrored across various newspapers in the aftermath of his comment (Lister, 2009, August 1; McAlpine, 2009, August 2 for instance).

> with the Bible's implied disappointment with the non-conformist sexual subject: 'I am bi, female and proud, I want no God who is disappointed in this'. There were several textual emendations, some of which strayed from the margins to overwrite the original text. The opening words of Genesis were crossed out to read 'In the beginning, God (me) I created religion' (Sherwood, 2010: 1-2)

Implicit within the initial (and perhaps insouciant innocence) of the invitation was the *possibility* of finding signs of defacement and desecration amidst the scribbles and scrawls openly inscribed by gallery-goers: Jane Clarke's material Bible was being asked for written annotations to its biblical material and this was the expected, encouraged sought-after and in many ways respectable response. The threat was an integral part of its constitution – in theory, anyway.

From the viewing angle of the gallery and the MCC at least, the unexpected response was the tirade of condemnation that outpoured onto the exhibit (largely through media channels),[106] a tirade that became unstoppable only by the eventual placement of the Bible – a now "bruised and battered victim" assaulted by injurious biro-pens (Sherwood, 2010: 9) – inside a glass case. "Congratulations to the Gallery of Modern Art," began *The Sunday Times* reporter writing in scathing tones of implicit condemnation about this "particular work of brilliance" (Liddle, 2009, July 29). Elsewhere, *The Times* condemned GoMA for "encouraging people to deface the Bible in the name of art – and visitors," the article explained, "have responded with abuse and obscenity" (Wade, 2009). Referencing the "puerile and obscene remarks" scrawled over the Bible, *The Daily Mail* registered a distinct sense of vitriol (Grant, 2009, July 28). And slightly more kindly, a writer for *The Independent* offered those responsible for the exhibit a condescending ticking-off for their "pretty dodgy idea" (Lister, 2009, August 1).

These examples represent just a handful of the many critical, and at times angry, media reports on the fracas, but – far more interesting than the journalistic frenzy the exhibition permitted – is the question of the mechanism of the what-happened-next. This involves considering the critical move of placing the injured Bible-victim, now permanently "daubed with expletives" that only a fixed container could now hide

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[106] The GoMA Bible fracas even reached the Cotswolds, where a copycat incident (involving some abusive felt tip graffiti acts on the expensive church Bible) was blamed on the gallery exhibit (Fisher, 2009, August 10). The vicar explained that "the sacrilegious crime … shocked the community" and the police in the Cotswolds appeared to respond to the sense of gravity attached to the crime by seeking witnesses and offering a crimestoppers hotline to aid their investigation of the culprits (Fisher, 2009, August 10).

(Rothwell, 2009, July 29), in its glass-case by noting that this was no heavy-handed politico-police operation, but, on the contrary, was at the instigation and request of the artist herself, Rev. Jane Clarke (*cf.* BBC news, 2009; Rothwell, 2009, July 29).

This twist in the GoMA Bible tale incorporates an apologetic and "saddened" Clarke (Rothwell, 2009, July 29) providing open admissions to the already waiting media that the installation had gone awry: It wasn't meant to happen so (McAlpine, 2009, August 2); there was never any wish to cause offence to Christians (or even people more generally) (BBC news, 2009); and the Bible should, simply, never have been "used like that" (Wade, 2009, July 23). It is therefore a 'sorry' from a contrite Clarke, and by association the MCC also, for a failed hope, indeed belief, that respect would be shown (Sherwood, 2010: 6).

Asking questions of the 'intention' of the GoMA Bible piece, however, is a bit more complex than easy listening tracks announcing apologies. As Sherwood has subtly disentangled, there is a hidden mystery tucked behind the sorry that reveals that Clarke and the MCC "never anticipated, nor invited, any *negative* comment" (Sherwood, 2010: 6, italics original).[107] This aspect of things – cushioned in naïveté claims – is a vital one in my reading of the GoMA Bible tale because it appears so confusingly contradictory: what was this Bible supposed to publicly represent in a cultural exhibition named sh[OUT] – overtly designed to honour inclusivity and LGBTI rights – if it were only intending to be a silently timid passenger in the nice and tidy business of happy family politics via some positively laden experimental story-telling name-writing in annotated marginalia and little more? (*cf.* Rothwell, 2009, July 29; Wade, 2009, July 23; MacDonald, 2009, August 2).[108]

The problem is that in situations such as this one, by not allowing bad things to happen to nice people or good Bibles, the status quo runs un-tethered while challenging

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[107] As part of this claim, Clarke explained in justifying her naïveté on the basis that the installation related to how "as a child, her church has encouraged her to write her thoughts in the margins of the Bible she used while at prayer. 'This was an extension of that idea,' she said, ducking the verbal missiles hurled at her from various pews and pulpits" (McAlpine, 2009, August 2).

[108] sh[OUT]'s general focus latched onto the idea of the marginalised and excluded, both of which are highly ambiguous terms in themselves. In an insightful analysis on this aspect of the GoMA Bible in particular, Yvonne Sherwood comments on the exhibit's implied politics of inclusion in saying: "With a nod to the margins and the marginalised, we (that is, if we have a LGBTI identity pass) are permitted to inscribe and record our marginalisation as a prologue to being drawn back into/embraced by the Bible's all-inclusive centrifugal power" (Sherwood, 2010: 9).

questions dissolve. In the GoMA case, the Bible ends up becoming the innocent victim at the naughty (pen-scrawling) hands of some sinister factor of people despite there being more than enough room in the original intention of the exhibit for the Bible to act as the bad guy battering people (especially those with an LGBTI tag) from within the pages of its well-known 'texts of terror'.[109] By hounding and haranguing people rather than sacred texts, is the Bible rosily protected in a purity bubble it perhaps doesn't deserve?[110]

Like earlier reading the GoMA Bible in reverse by starting first at the end of its story enclosed in a glass case, introducing the remaining sections of this chapter involves beginning with its conclusion – an end point in which Jacques Derrida's themes on forgiveness are considered in dialogue with our earlier question-filled ideas in chapter 1 in order to extend an imaginative possibilities of God forgiving the Bible for its difficult portrayal of 'God' as a trauma of misrepresentation. Prior to its deconstructive conclusion in 2.3, the main section of chapter 2 involves a discussion on the material Bible (*i.e.* its deep-fried, postage-stamp ontology) and its biblical material (such as scrawled-upon sh[OUT] sections). It is by bringing questions about the possibilities of reading Christianity's texts differently (as both object and content value separately and together) are raised and developed through a dialogue between the contrary (and perhaps critical) positions of Marcella and churchgoers on both.

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[109] The phrase 'texts of terror' is in common use, but its roots lie with Phyllis Trible's now decades old *Texts of Terrors* (1984), and it remains a critical text for feminist theologies (even though the book itself originated from a different, earlier, and more straightforward second wave stage of the feminist theology's development). *Texts of Terror* occupies one of the enduring classic key texts defining feminist theological approaches, alongside others from the same era, eg, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (1983), Sallie McFague's *Models of God* (1987), and Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983).

[110] There are, of course, different readings of the meaning of the GoMA Bible and these are additional rather than contradictory. Yvonne Sherwood, for instance, has analysed the case – 'The Bible in a Glass Case: Reflections on a Recent Case of Blasphemy, 'Defacing', and Saving the Bible's Public Face' (in Sherwood, 2010) – by focussing less on its content (in contrast to my overt focus on the sexuality subtext) and more on the idea of the presence and role of the object of the Bible in civil, political and religious situations. In Sherwood's reading, the Bible, "no longer [considered] a given and perceived as needing the protection of respect," has allowed for the development of an alternative reading whereby, she suggests that, "what was so scandalising [about the GoMA Bible scrawling] was not so much their content as their very presence, which was read as constituting a massive social threat" (Sherwood, 2010: 2, 3).

2.2
Bringing Biblical Material to the Material Bible

i.
Ingesting Indecency Imaginatively

When I was a child, so to speak, I was acutely conscious
of myself in the act of reading/hearing the Bible
as I was not with any other book.
I swallowed bits of the Bible in chunks,
like pills, in memory verses …
Yvonne Sherwood (2010: 72)

Shaking up the sh[OUT] exhibition in Glasgow's GoMA was yet another installation piece, similarly themed, but a bit more racy than the sleeping-beauty-Bible in its glass case. Roxanne Claxton is a video performance artist, and she created a visual narrative of Bible consumption as her 2009 entry. This featured Claxton herself fearlessly ripping pages from a torn-up Bible, and inserting them into a variety of possible personal cavities: fragments were pushed inside her clothes and underwear, stuffed into her ears and nostrils, and crammed into her mouth. Biblical scraps were permissibly jammed into her to satisfy her artistic pursuit.[111] Like the earlier examples of the deep-fried, postage-stamp, glass-case versions of the Bible's object ontology, Claxton's orifice-scrunching one also exuded a similar reading of its entity substance as a material Bible.

There's a strangely analogous link between Claxton's recent Glasgow-based installation and some decade-old digestion-type Bible memories of Marcella's that relate (as so often they did via recollected anecdotes) back to her earlier life in Argentina and its context, which, as she frequently noted, lived amidst the colonial confusion and

[111] Further commentary about this installation, and an illuminating analysis from Yvonne Sherwood, involves reading Claxton's Eucharistic tones within the video piece alongside the Hebrew Prophets (Sherwood, 2010: 55-56). Sherwood, in initiating a phone conversation with Claxton to discuss her work prior to its publication (in print, 2012), now presents a more nuanced analysis of Claxton's piece which incorporates a revealing analysis of the artist's original intentions for it. Here I am, however, referring to newspaper media excerpts issued at the time which seemed less interested in sourcing (and understanding) Claxton's intentions for it at the time. Related to this, it is intriguing to consider why so little fanfare about Claxton's installation was received in comparison to Clarke's GoMA Bible, even though the video could have carried a more violent subtext.

collusion of ruling dictatorial regimes. Those were times when people mattered very little against the heavy might of political, economic and religious control-tactics.[112] It is out of such a context of urban poverty in Buenos Aires that many of Marcella's most incisive moments come, and this example of her writings on the "Bible-drinkers" represents an intriguing account of what I am calling the Bible's object ontology, its material Bible (*cf.* 2004a; 2003b). As Marcella said, the poor of Buenos Aires "relate to neither the written text of the Bible nor to the doctrines of the churches. Their faith and their 'Bible' is of a different nature" (2003b: 214), and the following section attempts to explain what she meant.

The 'poor' of Marcella's Bible-drinkers are an ambiguous group that she met in Buenos Aires "some time ago" (2004a: 156). They are the 'poorest of the poor', the *Fracasados* – a disparaging and insulting term used for the rejected outcasts, people existing as life's failures, which, she says, places them on the bottom rung of every economic and social hierarchy (2003b: 204): they are the marginalised unemployed who live "under bridges, in the streets, in slums, or in mental institutions" (2003b: 222).[113] But while they are "disempowered people," the *Fracasados* are also, as Marcella describes them, people with "a strong need for the concrete presence of God in their lives," a need "so strong that they literally 'drink the Bible' with their tea" (2003b: 204). She shares her knowledge of the practice of ingesting biblical fragments amidst the *Fracasados* by explaining how they "might cut a page out of the Bible (commonly a Psalm or another text recommended by someone who knows about these things)" (2004a: 155). Continuing to detail the mechanics and meaning of the practice, Marcella reveals how:

> The page is then cut up into small pieces, soaked in a glass of water and drunk, for purposes of protection, empowerment or luck in gambling. For instance, drinking Psalm 23 is said to be effective against the dangers of being exposed to drug wars in the neighbourhood. Drinking Jeremiah 33.3 is said to

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112 While oppression against political and economic forces is fairly straightforward, Marcella's position is complicated with the complex religious milieu from which she wrote as someone rooted in an Argentinian context, leading her to say that "amongst Latin American people, popular religiosity seems to occupy a space that is almost opposite to that taken up by any religious discourse based on words or the reading of sacred text" (2003b: 214).

113 Even though she claimed it to have been a "well-known practice" (2003b: 210) in Buenos Aires, who exactly the people Marcella referred to as 'Bible-drinkers' remains mysteriously sketchy: perhaps they might be, to some extent at least, embellished developments of her ever creative imagination?

> be effective when a member of the family is lost and the family would like to make contact (2004a: 155).

In this sense, the material Bible – the fragmentary paper icons ripped out of the full-version-Bible and sipped in tea-cups – may reveal a superstitious talismanic virtue of acts of transgression found amidst the Bible-drinkers. The Bible-drinkers' "habit" (2003b: 200) of ingesting tea laced with tiny torn up texts appears to have a dual purpose that is marked by an alchemy "characterized by a religiosity of survival" (2003b: 214). Firstly, in Marcella's understanding, drinking the Bible amidst the *Fracasados* provides protection and courage, and is a performative operation undertaken by people as a shield "in order to protect themselves from crimes that the police or state do little or nothing to prevent," while similarly acting as a protective "defence against their afflictions" (2003b: 210). And, secondly, the Bible-drinkers gain a sense of comfort and resilience from the practice, which bolsters their "emotional strength to confront life," by ingesting fragments in a virtual way as like "a book of concrete formulas" (2003b: 213).

The *Fracasados'* very concrete, creative and embodied 'reading' of the material Bible both challenges the normative status of Christianity's Sacred Text as it is utilised in churches, but also represents a strong revisionary tactic pointing to the possibilities of understanding the text's potential amidst the urban poor of Buenos Aires. This innovative reading extends the material Bible's utility value in Latin American contexts, Marcella has said that the *Fracasados* "believe that their material interpretation of God … brings them not only protection and blessing but also a rich spirituality and a 'hermeneutics of presence' that challenges the paradigms of Liberation Theology" (2003b: 200). In other words, they are re-writing Christian theology with the focus on everyday lives being counted its premium aspect. Their material Bible is "not theologically mediated" (2003b: 218) but ruled by a people-first injunction. Not doing the 'Bible' in the way it is supposed to be done, issues a sharp challenge that releases new possibilities of what a Sacred Text might mean.

Marcella's Bible-drinkers present a very interesting, if extreme, illustration of an alternative role the material Bible has in a Latin American context. Marks of this are further evident in the hermeneutical circle of Liberation Theology's BECs which came to prominence in the 70's and 80's in countries like Argentina and had a strong influence on her theological ideas. Liberation Theology's premises remain innovative

and popular strands of Christian theologies overtly interpreted for and with 'the people' (whatever such a global term might mean) in a dialogic relationship with everyday life via a "community-based [biblical] hermeneutic" (2003b: 203). To paraphrase the elements Marcella identified in Latin American Liberation Theology (henceforth LALT; *cf.* 2003b: 201-203), the hermeneutical process involves a focus understood to be: firstly, always community orientated, where the Bible is a "meaningful text with a live message only when it is actualized through a communal reading" (2003b: 201); secondly, the process is always contextually based and situationally grounded, and the Bible requires to be read against current problems; thirdly, Bible reading is always dynamically on-the-move and project-focused, "entering into the world of the text … to pursue transformative action" while seeking change so that "a community will never the same again" (2003b: 203); and, fourthly, reading is always analytically engaged in applying critical suspicion of situations and texts; hunting elements of conscientization by asking repeated questions of the status quo.[114]

While Marcella's work was deeply rooted in her LALT background, she always went further in challenging each of the components she listed above, and, in many ways, she seemed uniquely able to radicalize and invigorate the potential she found in its already progressive elements. She did it to such an extent that from 1996 onwards she had begun to call her revision of LALT 'Indecent Theology'.[115] In my reading of it,

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[114] Marcella has, at various points, alluded to the division between idealism and realism in relation to LALT's hermeneutical biblical practices. Despite the ideology of community-focuses readings sold to European and North American markets, in reality it was not quite so saleable at the grassroots level of the BECs. She alleges that this was largely because "the Roman Catholic Church did not encourage the reading of the Bible in the BECs; the Bible was used sparingly, because the BECs were constituted almost completely by illiterate people and the church had not promoted the Bible during its five hundred years of existence in Latin American" (1993: 15-16).

[115] In my reading of Marcella's writing through her development of Indecent Theology out of earlier roots of LALT, one of the critical changes between both appears to lie with LALT's resistance to displace the Bible (plus its, at times, difficult God) in direct contrast with IT's determination to continually (and forcefully) do so. Liberation Theology's insurrectionary motives locates oppression elsewhere, beyond Christianity – *i.e.* there is little critique of Christianity *per se*, but instead the using of liberationary readings of Christian theology in order to upturn externally placed oppressions. Catherine Keller has summarised the rhetoric of these issues well in noting that, while still recognising Liberation Theology's political merit and "irreducible legitimacy of struggle," there is little criticism of the Bible in its agenda. "The liberation hermeneutic pretends," Keller summarises, "… that the Bible itself presents an unambiguously liberatory vision. It ignores the acquiescence in classism, xenophobia, authoritarianism, sexism, heterosexism, and violence that burdens much of the canonical text, indeed much of the exodus and prophetic tradition" (Keller, 2005: 101). Furthermore, Keller continues, "in order to guarantee a final eschatological triumph for the poor … [Liberation

Indecent Theology is strongly influenced by creative deconstructive principles related to the key roles of freedom and possibilities found throughout Marcella's thinking. Principally interested in points of fissure, she was most strikingly original when extending her thoughts about the Bible and God to new limits. She carried a lightness about possessing the Bible sporadically as an openly re-imagined entity – a text which she was happier to see as sayings and stories, proverbs and quotations – that was most of value as a treasured utility amongst people.

People, in reading Marcella's writing, always came first, and always before the Bible. "Being less dependent on the actual text," she said,

> … this 'popular Bible' that exists among people on the margins of exclusion is a freer one: just as stories change in the retelling, the 'Bible' becomes malleable and can speak to disparate contexts in a way that is more fitting (2004a: 155).

When theologies become people-first ideologies, then the Bible is still valued but known in a different way, and within it emerge revisionary possibilities for God as well. This theme was long cemented in Marcella's work, and is conveyed in one of her earliest published writing where people's "lives become a living text where God manifests Godself, and from there, the events of liberation in the Scripture are rescued and reflected upon in a circle of '*realidad*-Bible-*realidad*'" (1996a: 199). Reality crams the Bible between people on both sides – with the options to control how it can or may be used, universally open and available to anyone as required. In this sense, the Bible is itself freed from its own 'pre-labelling' issued by the Church's value hierarchies. It is from such a sense of freedom that the possibilities within the biblical material for the arrival of an alternative God comes.

These examples of the material Bible, cushioned in a particularly located Latin American perspective, appear in Marcella's outlook to position it as a certain type of text – a remembered nostalgic version from her earlier life in Argentina. It is from such a time, found as it was amidst the country's sharp cultural and political forces in the 1970s, that Marcella revealed her recollection of the Bible as an entity accessorized with a cover-sleeve image "of a Che Guevara Christ, a Christ with a beret, smoking a Cuban cigar" (2000a: 95), a provocative material Bible which *by* its object value rather than

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Theology] left largely unquestioned dogmas of divine transcendence and omnipotence," and, as such, "its God seems to remain, despite the 'below' of the poor, the Almighty Subject" – and one who is also a heterosexually masculine God-concept as well (Keller, 2005: 101).

inner content constructed "Christ the subversive, the terrorist" to antagonise the political, cultural and religious standards in Marcella's Latin American context. It was a symbolic material Bible (regardless of biblical material) that represented "a slap in the face of the state terrorism and the politics of foreign intervention and dictatorial regimes" (2000a: 95).[116] Never really diminishing the biblical material *per se*, its relevancies were opportunely allied with the material Bible's value in opening up its object symbolic. In those possibilities, Marcella discerned the potential of revolutionary tactics to agitate "traditional ecclesial interpretations" (2003b: 221) and with means to do something much more subversively as a result.

Nonetheless, the lines between material Bible and biblical material are at once distinct and simultaneously indistinguishable at the same time: for, even in discussing the Bible-drinkers' ingestion pursuits or the GoMA's glass-case Bible, the meaning of the biblical material is still not too far away in traces of representative ideas, and symbolic memory of what its content reportedly means. "Talking with some friends one winter afternoon in a flat in Dundee, I spontaneously remembered some lines of Jeremiah which I knew then by heart," Marcella revealed, in a way which traces how thin the constituent lines further extends between the Bible's object and content values are fragile divisions:

> We were used to reading the Bible as if the Scriptures were letters from our own mothers: a retelling of what we had been through, and words of comfort and assurance that, in the end, God's justice will prevail. The Bible was so factual; after all, death had come in some cases literally through our windows, as the paramilitaries were known for seldom ringing doorbells … This happened many years ago, when we were younger and our wounds fresher. It was the time when some of us felt that the only belonging we had were a handful of Psalms, which we quoted stubbornly, obsessively, provoking the curiosity of several church ministers in Fife (2003c: 127-128).[117]

It was this maelstrom of elements in Marcella's reading of the Bible (both material Bible and biblical material) that infected so much of her work in such a edifying way; but

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[116] Marcella made some very strong statements about such issues in this regard. "To be caught with a Latin American Bible," she suggested, or possessing "a copy of Paulo Freire's *Pedadgogy of the Oppressed* may have meant confinement in a concentration camp and a death sentence," further adding that these controversial Bibles "were burned in Argentina, together with the books of Foucault and Freire" (2000a: 95).

[117] "Some of the women who were gathered that afternoon in Dundee were, after all, part of the youth who managed to escape from the burning of Bibles in the public parks to the carnage of the football stadiums of Latin America," as Marcella detailed (2003c: 127-8).

before further considering her own highly creative thoughts on it, the next section of this chapter focuses on the alternative insights of Edinburgh churchgoers' through contrasting understandings of their markedly different sense of the material Bible.

ii.
Carefully Remembered Entities

The pages were tissue-thin and
every one was edged with gold.
It was very beautiful …
Heather Walton (2010: 318)

While churches can be friendly and hospitable places, there is probably more scope for churchgoers, after the service, to eat biscuits with their coffee in the hall than to attempt to drink the Bible, *Fracasados*-style, in cups of tea. But it would be imprudent to suggest that the Bible's object ontology – its material Bible – exists only amidst credible situations that are either a bit bizarre or exotic compared to the everyday humdrum business of Edinburgh churchgoing. On the contrary, insights from the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires suggest that far from being a stranger, the 'material Bible' is a companion force that has just as weighty an influence as the more conventionally understood 'biblical material'. So, while the material Bible is not imbibed by Bible-drinkers dotted around Presbyterian Scotland, it carries a current and persistent force nonetheless and in presenting research illustrations from churchgoers, this section offers new insights into how they use, view and treat their Sacred Text.

Memories are uniquely absorbing things, offering closets for imagined reminiscence; and they attach a level of vivid nostalgia especially in relation to childhood accounts. This short excerpt from a focus group dialogue displays such memories in relation to childhood Bibles:

Kate

I think of the Bibles you used to get as your Sunday School prize at the end of term, and it was teeny wee print, and as a child, you know, and looking at it from a child's perspective, no pictures in it, this tiny print, and words that I couldn't understand. That really didn't encourage you to read it, did it? You know.

Maya

On beautiful Indian paper, that lovely thin paper.

Kate

Yes, that's right. With the gold-edging. Yeah, uhuh.

(B, 31: 926-934).

As a child who grew up in the Church, Kate belonged to a congregation that bestowed upon her at an early age a Bible that was an object artefact: It was a book with "teeny

wee print … no pictures … and words that I couldn't understand," and, as such, stood as a symbol – not a reading book – from the start. Kate's easy, unprompted recollection of *this* Bible, a Bible of which she was the uneasy recipient whilst still learning to read, demonstrates how that particular (material) Bible had a lasting impact on her understanding of its status, symbolically stamping out for her what a book entitled 'Bible' could mean. Recounting it in some detail decades since, this was never a generic 'Bible' in any vague sense but a very particular token possession.

Through continued dialogue with Maya, Kate further concretises her childhood Sunday School Bible with its "gold-edging" features, and in doing so match Maya's description of her Bible made of "beautiful Indian paper, that lovely thin paper". In listening to Kate, Maya had herself accessed a material Bible story from related memories of her own. Unlike Kate's wary acceptance of her (still nonetheless preciously gold-edged) childhood Bible, Maya's description of her "beautiful … lovely" material Bible was more positive. She was nostalgic about its physical features, revealing affection for its loveliness, whilst overlooking the words inside the revered paper it contained. Yet, at an unwritten level the value Maya attached to those particular sheets of paper had their own status by merit of being bound together; the issue is not really about pretty paper *per se*, but instead what happens when they are congealed into the constituent elements of a Bible. In this sense, the lines between material Bible and biblical material are sometimes as closely connected as tissue thin paper themselves, and this is something I will develop later in this chapter.

It is at such levels that the Bible conveys its prominence *as an object*; it is already always something ontologically different than any other book. Memories of childhood Bibles are not uncommon, and they are in many ways already subliminally recognised *as* remembered, especially demarcated as something exceptional against all other possible books collected on the way to adulthood. In an interview, David, for instance, remembered the size of his teacher's "great big kind of Bibles, [the kind] that are children's illustrated Bibles" (C, 25: 237-238). And as something "we all had one in our desks," Jess, likewise, recalled "a special school Bible" from her schooldays (B, 126: 219).

Emma's recollection of the Bible in her childhood bypasses anecdotes from school, relating instead its meaning in relation to family visits to see her grandmother:

> We used to go to her house for a sort of High Tea on a Sunday, fortnightly, and we would get this big old Bible out which had kind of colour illustrations. I think the illustration I remember best is the one of Jesus when he's in the desert battling with the Devil (C, 47: 73-78).

This is a picture-book Bible in Emma's memories, not because it was unlikely to contain text in the form of biblical material, but because all that matters in her recollection of this Bible are its illustrative inserts. There is no apparent text in her remembered trips to see her grandmother, but instead just a strong account of the vivid images making up her grandmother's "big old Bible". Whether or not any Bible reading did occur during those Sunday visits for High Tea, it is no longer relevant since Emma's focus on the pictures alone has usurped any textual gaps in her childhood story, a story that in fact centres on one principle illustration alone – "Jesus when he's in the desert battling with the Devil". While, at a superficial level, Jesus' time in the desert might seem like as recollection of a biblical story, at a deeper one it seems better understood as functioning within the parameters of the Bible's object ontology, working out of the entity of a material Bible where wordless images of Jesus are sketched inside a 'Bible' frame.[118]

Similarly capturing the hierarchy of material Bible over biblical material in Emma's account, Cathie's childhood memories offer an alternative example along comparable themes. Her granddad had died before she had met him, but Cathie's mother had informed her of a Bible that had once belonged to him, and as a child she wanted to find it. Describing seeing her granddad's Bible for the first time, Cathie began with its physical features, as others in the interviews and focus groups have likewise done:

> … and I came across this book that was wrapped in a sort of oilskin because the cover and everything was off it, it was one of those, if you would touch it it would almost disintegrate kind of Bibles, obviously well-used and well-loved (C, 265: 72-75).

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[118] Furthermore, the story Emma remembered about her grandmother's family Bible's ideographic Jesus might be considered difficult in itself, for, depending on which particular Bible it refers to, it could have been a traumatic picture for a child. The strong place of childhood Bible stories are evident in various places amidst churchgoers' thoughts in this study: "I still feel, in a way, my attitude to the Bible and my faith is still based on my Sunday School days, you know. I'm still a teenager as regards the Bible and all the nice stories in the Bible," Frances said (C, 144: 259-261); Janet, meanwhile, remarks on the fact that "I suppose we all know these stories so well" (B, 41: 78).

While her immediate relatives were apparently not churchgoers, at that level in Cathie's childhood an object Bible was being constructed indirectly via family hearsay of her granddad and second-hand knowledge of the Bible that was his – and elements of its preciousness are evident in her words describing it. This was conveyed as a uniquely treasured and immediately valuable Bible *because* it was her granddad's known through folk-tales and falling to bits, the disintegration of it supplementing its status immensely.

Continuing further with this retelling of her granddad's Bible, Cathie focused on how, as a child, she found "all these scriptures right through the Old Testament and the New Testament all underlined, right through the Bible" (C, 264: 76-77), something she remembers being mesmerised by:

> … at the time as a kid I just loved looking through these scriptures and searching to find the next one that he'd underlined. So it was like an adventure, really (C, 265: 86-88).

Those annotations written onto and into her granddad's Bible had created for a young Cathie an exciting game which, even though linked to the biblical material, the words of the page was very much being addressed at the level of the Bible as an object, a material Bible, where the underlined quotations were a fun competition of hide and seek.

As the above illustrations from interviews with Cathie and Emma have revealed, understanding how the Bible features – at an object level among families – marks a lasting impact on some churchgoers' current view of its status. Kate, who earlier remembered her Sunday School Bible somewhat disaffectedly, also had a family story about her grand-aunt's Bible that, like Emma's grandmother's, was placed "on the table in the dining room" on a Sunday. Kate similarly detailed how "that would be part of the tradition on a Sunday, you know gathering round reading the Bible" she said (B, 33: 994-995). Kate's memory of this Bible on her great aunt's table arose during a focus group discussion responding to issues concerning the question of whether a Bible could be discarded or disposed of. Linking this to her thoughts of this childhood family-visit Bible she recalled, Kate continued:

> Perhaps, for some people, [it would] be almost part of their life, part of their home … and therefore to give that away, it's probably like, you know, it would be a treasured possession, and there would be some reluctance to do that (B, 33: 989-992).

This issue of considering the Bible as a "treasured possession" carried into other churchgoers' thoughts, and is evident through focus group discussions along similar

lines.[119] Sandy, for instance, decided that while "logically there isn't really any reason why I shouldn't take a Bible with which I'm finished and put it in the dustbin," something appears to impede his wish to do so: "It seems almost sacriligeous. But is that just superstition?" he asks (B, 103: 828-829). Also toiling with this ambiguous question, the 'should-I-or-shouldn't-I' question about throwing away or destroying a material Bible, Paul revealed that he too "would think twice about lobbing a Bible into the wheely bin," before then asking in apparent qualifying confusion: "But there's no reason why not, is there?" (B, 103: 845-846).

The complicated permission question surrounding issues of how to (im)properly dispose of old Bibles is an intriguing one for me, and seemed to be an illuminating one raised amidst focus group participants themselves, who, like Sandy and Paul above, were found asking new existential questions over what they might do. There was an underlying ambiguity about it – a not knowing – from most, apart from a basic subterranean sense that this kind of thing should not really be done to a Bible, and was somehow improper. Amidst the several churchgoers who expressed thoughts on the topic, Paul's comments seemed most revealing and this is because he – unlike the others – brought God into the inquiry. "I mean," Paul said with some measured incredulity, "is God going to mind if I tossed one in the wheely bin? When it was tattered and old? He's not, is he?" (B, 104: 858-859).

Within those queries Paul summons, a critical element is at play that relates to the idea of the taut connectivity linking God with the Bible and the Bible with God (at both material Bible and biblical material levels, something that will be further considered in the next section of this chapter). In those newly constructed thoughts of Paul's, God doesn't have a problem with the idea of throwing away the Bible, but *we* have a problem doing such a thing to the Bible because the Bible is inimically linked to God; and, as such, the material Bible acts as a talismanic object *representing* God in God's absence regardless of any words carried within its covers. The Bible, as commonly understood amidst churchgoers, is, it would seem, an object automatically set-apart by its sacrality *sine-qua-non*, with its inner-core God traits creating an unmoving respect "to the extent that," as Howard has said, "the actual <u>book itself</u> [is] given a place of honour" (B, 61:

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[119] Various respondents made comments about issues related to how (or whether) an object material Bible might be discarded or thrown away: Howard (B, 59: 640-645), Jess (B, 140: 726-727), Cybil (B, 60: 676-678), Janet (B, 60: 680-687), Alison (B, 32: 962-963 and 34: 1039), Maya (B, 32-33: 981-996).

697-698).[120] This close relationship with God is "why it's set apart and why it's different" in words from Agnes (B, 89: 868-869), her thoughts helpfully conveying a common wisdom that appears to be similarly shared by various churchgoers in relation to what the Bible as a God-inspired object apparently means.

The material Bible is also, in a decisive way, deeply involved in the context of the Church itself: as Christianity's Sacred Text, it operates in certain manners on the level of its object ontology. In an interview, Ruby described how, during Sunday worship in her church, the beadle:

> … carries the Bible in every week ahead of the minister and yes, it is placed, it's placed on the lectern open at the lesson that's going to be, the first lesson that's going to be read. And beyond that it tends to be laid, you know, it's there as a visual sign of why we're there. It's part of our, what we're here for (C, 129: 312-316).

Acting as the Church's primary symbol, the Bible is then, in Ruby's example, an object which both precedes and accompanies everything that happens in worship settings: even if there is "nobody stand[ing] there [who] picks it up and waves it about," it nonetheless acts as "a visual symbol apart from two readings" and, as such, "it just symbolizes that this is Church" (C, 129: 317-318, 325).[121] The Bible has a subtle yet decisively insidious status statement in Ruby's understanding, one that is marked not simply by its involvement in the liturgical mechanics of her church especially, but also as a superlative symbol for what Christianity, more generally, is taken to mean. After all, as Maya commented about a related issue in her focus group discussion:

> Presbyterians are built on the Bible, not the buildings, so, you know, the Bible is central to our tradition, the way it's carried in and placed there, so that's why we do perhaps reverence it (B, 33: 1017-1019).[122]

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[120] Added to this comment, Howard remarked that in "even the commonest of households that there was a, the Bible" (B, 61: 698-700; *cf.* B, 59: 649-650); see also related ideas conveyed by Frank (B, 59: 647), Portia (B, 60: 661-663, 673-674), and Daisy (B, 60: 665-671) in the same focus group discussion.

[121] Some similar ideas are found in comments by Howard (B, 49: 300-302), Angus (C, 69: 333-337), and John, who said of the Bible in relation to worship, that "what it, what it should, what it should be signifying to everyone is that everything is very much dependent on the Word of God, that is, God speaking to us. So, and that is of course crucial in the Reformed tradition" (C, 209: 660-662).

[122] Maya added an additional comment, in referring to the fact that "Muslims treat the Quran so deferentially. You're not, you must hold it, you mustn't put it on the floor, you know. I must say I find it very difficult when people putting Bibles on the floor" (B, 34: 1041-1044). In his interview, John also raised comparable issues on this theme by saying that "Protestant churches" should "be believing on purely the supremacy of the Bible over everything in matters of doctrine and faith" (C, 209: 666-667).

Unequivocally an identity marker at the nexus of the Church of Scotland tradition, churchgoers' reading of the material Bible confers upon it a necessary – if not crucial – role.[123] Yet, as Maya thoughtfully conveyed at another point in her focus group discussion, alongside its elevated status position in Christianity, the Bible is most basically a "story about Jesus" without which Christians would know little of him at all:

> … if we hadn't had the Bible to read about him and to continue to go on reading about him, where would we know about him? And so that, to me, the Bible to me has now become more important because I feel that's where, you know, I learned about God (B, 18: 498-501).

Analysing the reading practices of churchgoers alongside Marcella's position forms the focus of the next section of this chapter, which now proceeds by evaluating meanings attached to its biblical material content more fully.[124]

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[123] This is seen, for example, in some interview excerpts by Hamish (B, 17: 455-456), Murdo (C, 87: 281-283), David (C, 41: 837-843) and Alice (B, 118: 1346-1349). Issues on this general theme are further supported by a questionnaire entry, Question 7 (App. D, Qn7), which considered what churchgoers felt the Bible represented and meant to them: "The Bible is commonly known as 'The Good Book'. In your opinion, in a few words, what does this statement mean?" Of the 520 people who participate in Qn7, more than half (299) conveyed their ideas through three prominent categories which emerged through my analysis of the results: churchgoers referred to the Bible in terms of its general offer of life-guidance (120/520), of how it, more directly, provides instructions in showing how to live life (69/520), and, significantly, incorporating ideas that became apparent in churchgoers' entries that the Bible is itself the Good Book of 'Good News' related to Jesus, salvation, and God's plan *etc.* (110/520). Respondents offered variable additional comments in their replies, and a full content-list summary for this question is itself very revealing and available in Appendix D (App. D, Qn7).

[124] Although listed here as just a footnote reference, this is, nonetheless, an opportune moment to refer to another important questionnaire entry, Question 6, from the research project relating to the issue of personal Bible reading amidst churchgoers: "Do you read the Bible outside of Sunday worship?" (App. D, Qn6). Designed for tick-box responses, it became clear through my analysis of Qn6 that such levels of biblical reading *is* happening amidst churchgoers with some regularity: nearly 400 respondents chose to say that the Bible is read 'frequently' (by 156 people) or 'sometimes' (235). This seems to be highly suggestive that personal Bible reading is in fact happening outside of regular Church worship. Further information about the remaining categories that respondents ticked and a fuller breakdown of this question are available in Appendix D (App. D, Qn6).

iii.
Tampering Tensions of Biblical Texts

Justice as integral to our conception of God forms
a community dialogue with the Bible,
outside the printed word
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000a: 130)

Like several churchgoers in this research study who earlier commented on the material Bible's object ontology, Alison also makes reference to its "leather-bound, thin pages" in the focus groups discussion she participated in. However, unlike the others who made comparable comments about the physical details of the material Bible, she followed her remarks about its constituent features with an exclamation, seemingly a bit taken aback by her own words: "Gosh! That's wrong then, that's terribly wrong," she said, "it's making this object more important than actually what's inside it" (B, 35: 1053-1055). Alison's shock is interesting in the way that it delineates the tensions between and within the Bible itself, marking the bifurcation that I have been describing throughout by referring to 'material Bible' and 'biblical material'. These issues, which further extend the duality traced within the Bible's object and content qualities, permeate the developing tensions between Marcella and churchgoers in this section.

Implicit within Alison's self-reprimand to value the Bible's message-meaning substance more highly than its thing-like constitution, a latent hierarchy is marked whereby content trumps status object. The Bible as an object is demeaned by those seemingly higher, apparently truer content issues it is understood to convey; the biblical material clearly matters far more. In contrast, as Marcella stated many years ago, undermining ontologically bifurcated hierarchies through her deconstructive poststructuralist position, "my concept of text is very wide, and the churches and their traditions are like texts in themselves" (1993: 31).

When texts are "very wide", as Marcella puts it, the value hierarchies at play in Alison's comments are flattened out, and this is enabled by reading beyond conventional ideas of what the word 'text' (newly dissolved as a straightforwardly simple referent marker) normally means. Marcella's tactical reading involves a duality in conceptual forces that impact her reading of the Bible through incorporating material Bible and

biblical material simultaneously. Both are 'texts' and, as such, Marcella's work addresses the Bible (split here between object and content) via the interstices between them.

Marcella, from her earliest theological writings, found a niche – a vocation, perhaps – in revising accepted standardised concepts by applying a risky, and often humorous, original inventive twist. In one of her first published essays, for instance, she brought into play the idea of "walking with women-serpents" (1993: 32), this functions as a hermeneutical strategy for reading texts politically and culturally "from women's perspective" (1993: 32).[125] By way of a wry, less than subtle, Genesis reference, Marcella's creation of a sassy "woman-serpent" moniker delivered a clever punch at hundreds of Patriarchal-led years of biblical (mis)readings. Her trope brought deconstructive feminism to the Bible's opening pages and contradicted the notion of a foolish, gullible Eve in order to stamp on its quandaries with a trespassing spirit. By twisting assumed conventions, Marcella placed in its centre a woman-serpent who released necessary options for women themselves. A woman-serpent is indispensable because, as she explained, people are so used:

> … to a universal reading of the scriptures (for example, 'for all humanity'), without suspecting that such an ample perspective excludes a lot of people from marginal groups. The universal reading is really European, male and white. To read from a different perspective does not sound 'legitimate'. But this is the point: it is not a legitimate reading that we want, since legitimization is the instrument of support of patriarchal ideologies, inside and outside the churches. Our interpretation wants to rescue elements of illegitimacy and subversion (1993: 32).[126]

A woman-serpent is, as such, a marker filled with possibilities for people-first purpose-driven theologies such as those Marcella continually pursued. She stands as an enabling and revolutionary concept who has what it takes to skilfully shake up and not slither past the insidious inertia of Christianity's problematic status quo.

For Marcella, any revolution must commit to begin with sexual issues. She was forcefully insistent that the heterosexual milieu in everything that exists came complete

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[125] This 1993 essay incorporating the "women-serpent" conceptualisation drawn into the dialogue here is particularly Latin American in its focus (as most of Marcella's earlier writings are), but the ideas conveyed in it need not be geographically linked.

[126] Because 'Eve' has caused eternal problems in Christian thinking, Marcella's 'woman-serpent' concept usurps the apparently necessary condemnation this particular mythic woman (and by extension, women throughout time it is frequently assumed) has to endure. Any woman-serpent who found value in her mythic snake encounter is not considered a 'legitimate' reading but, instead, is herself a vital hermeneutic *by* enabling the undermining of the very legitimizing normative forces in standard biblical reading.

with its own sinister "God-like qualities" (1998b: 5) and that it was an ideology of standardised systems revealed through a universally accepted "abstract concept, a given, a metanarrative which claims to be natural and not needed" (1998b: 5).[127] In other words, its own method kept heteronormativity cleverly concealed below the radar, and this component was what Marcella found most contemptible of all. Heterosexuality, as she put it very ably in *Indecent Theology*:

> … is not a natural science and the inner logic of the system works with its own artificially created 'either/or' concepts. It unifies the ambivalence of life into one official version. Per/versions (the different versions of a road) are silenced (2000a: 13).

And these 'different versions of a road' that she named 'per/versions' are critical concepts of the hermeneutical policy of "alternative imaginaries" (2001a: 243) and "strategic complexities" (2006e: 128) found within Indecent Theology.

Per/versions are challenging, alternative and necessary tactical reading strategies because, in Marcella's understanding, "the Bible has been an open text for advancing the interests of the powerful" (2003b: 208). Rooted in a 'reading for rupture' technique that originated with Paul Ricoeur,[128] she expanded its potential with the idea of per/versions, describing it as "theologically related to alternative versions of options which it is our duty to imagine. Per/version (as a different version or understanding) is the methodological path to take against projects of sameness" (2002a: 33). As a creative technique for rewriting from the points of fissure found through alternative readings,

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[127] Marcella preferred, for "conceptual efficacy" (1998b: 6), the use of 'Heterosexualism' rather than 'Patriarchalism' in all but her earliest essays. This is because, in her understanding, "Heterosexuality is a more transparent term than Patriarchalism. Heterosexuality is a concept that denounces more clearly the dualistic conceptions of the patriarchal system with a coldness which allows us to remember what is at the base of our experience of reality" (1997: 46) Heterosexualism, she explains, is also "a less contested and more pervasive assumption than Patriarchalism (a historical term), and it is more straightforward when addressing the core of metadiscourses. I use 'Heterosexuality' following Adrienne Rich's classical definition: 'Heterosexuality is a political compulsory institution with different but interconnected manifestations'" (1998b: 6).

[128] Ricoeurian traces – and most especially the phrase "reading for rupture," but also ideas of his "surplus of meaning" and "second naiveté" – are found throughout Marcella's writings, and are related to her early use of Paul Ricoeur's work in her PhD work on LALT at St. Andrews University. Originally, Marcella began her doctoral studies there under the supervision of Daphne Hampson, before moving her focus mid-way from feminism to LALT and with that decision a new alternative supervisor. Like Marcella, who took a critical standpoint on Feminist Theology, Hampson was less accepting on Christianity than Marcella was and considered herself to be decisively post-Christian. Hampson journey out of a Christian position is narrated in her own writing (*cf.* Hampson, 1990, 1996, 1998).

per/versions aim to agitate biblical texts in the search of the possibilities of potential versions through a "Bible outside the Bible" *modus operandi* (2003b: 203).[129]

If per/versions mean, more generally, a technique for readings for rupture, 'permutations' – "reading in betweenness" (2003a: 108) – is a word that represents another of Marcella's original concepts for alternative biblical hermeneutics, and one that incorporates the *sourcing* of better interpretative alternatives intertextually following "that Queer, persistent trend to find different versions or alternative interpretations" (2003a: 7).[130] Permutations are strategic tactics of reading various (extra-biblical) texts together with the Bible in order to find "a different, non-progressive dynamic of reading" (2006e: 520) in the process, and by actively "opening the Bible from the closures of previous readings" (2003a: 110). Pragmatically, and without limits or fear, permutations "allow mismatches and incoherencies to resurface from a text" (2003a: 107), thereby fixing not on the arrival of "pre-determined conclusions" of normative standardized results from the biblical material but rather enjoying the possibilities gathered through the process of innovative, highly creative readings (2003a: 107). And in *The Queer God*, where Marcella first introduces 'permutations' as a new concept, the subject she is most interesting in re-imagining is in fact the potential for God.

It is this relentless pursuit of God-possibilities coupled with a persistent focus on ensuring theology develops into a strong people-first endeavour capable of opposing the "tyranny of custom" (2006e: 128) in standard hermeneutics that positions Marcella's work as a vital alternative that jars a theological system that is rarely understood to be either dialogic or revisable. Indecent Theology offers a new praxis by which to undermine this stagnancy; it positions high stilts for God and people on new vantage-points capacious enough to properly see the problems of closed readings within

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129 This "Bible outside the Bible" ideological focus is evident in many places where Marcella is insistent that people must become first in everything theological, and the Bible must itself reach out to people where they are. This is so important because "the awareness of the possibility of reading for oppression should always be the first issue because from there we can be on our guard against the possibility of a reading for bewilderment and alienation" (2003a: 80). "Bible outside the Bible" is a conceptual technique rooted in a LALT context which, as detailed above in p. 103, Marcella described as constituting a fourfold hermeneutical key that is based on: 1) community-based and dialogical, 2) people-driven and life-focused, 3) always of utility and practical value, and 4) critical in its desire for change to be realised.

130 Marcella is keen to point out that her concept of "permutations" as a hermeneutical tactic is not in itself hugely original, but the freedom surrounding available theological options is a new thing: "It is not a new way to read the Bible and it has been done before, but the basis for the choice of texts is seldom declared openly and they are frequently selected using criteria which could be the subject of disagreement" (2003a: 108).

Christianity's closet of systematic convention, issuing a sharp realisation of how contingent the whole thing works in order to realise more openly ethical options. In situations like this:

> … the community reflection tends to float free, finding new elements, arguing against others and enriching their lives outside the narrow confines of texts which were written two millennia ago, in a different setting and moment of humanity's historical consciousness … Individuals get crushed easily. The community's support and sustaining is crucial. The community carries the task of resurrection of crushed individuals all the time (2000a: 130).

Almost utopian, the indecency of Marcella's reading mechanisms distils what is good in the text by purposefully disregarding the rest. It does this so effectively by always placing people before theologies and, concomitantly, assuring room for a God that exceeds the standardised 'God' version known only through the controversial strictures of conventional reading of the Bible.

But, as seen already, Marcella's constructs are ideological devices in themselves, full of her own imaginative assumptions about how and what other people think. In contrast however, as the research project of this study has already begun to reveal, when examining parallel issues (such as the material Bible and its biblical material) the tension between churchgoers and Marcella at times appear seismic through this interstitial collaboration. The differences between both are uneasy places played out through the tensions that arise between the variant reading options available in their contrary locales, and in which alternative possibilities for God and people are found to be carved out very differently.

The Bible is, in the words of Jess, a focus group participant, "the primary way, I think, that God speaks to us" (B, 130: 368-369). As mentioned, in the preceding section about churchgoers' relationship with the material Bible, it is because of the Bible's direct association with God that people appear to have such a positive regard for it, understanding this not just in terms of the Bible's content (*i.e.* the information it conveys about Christianity's God), but because God has, at some level at least, a continued and active involvement with the Bible. The Bible is in this sense a mechanism for conveying God's instructions and desires, providing a mute megaphone of clarifying injunctions, and an ongoing communication channel. For Anita, the Bible is a "daily handbook" that is also "our instruction booklet" and manual: "We're like a washing machine [that] gets a manual sent with it, the Bible's our manual … [so] it's not just a

book" (C, 313: 364-367). For several churchgoers, it would seem that the Bible is a way of accessing what God wants – with the biblical material in this case providing the optimal place where, as Deirdre puts it, churchgoers can tap divine guidance via the biblical material "where we learn how to live our lives" just as "God wants us to live" (C, 296: 499-501).[131]

At the level of its textual production, the biblical material differs somewhat in its constitution effort amidst churchgoers.[132] To provide a couple of examples, Emma reasons that in order for "things [to] all come together, some kind of divine force putting this collection in writing in one volume" was probably involved (C, 54: 319-321), while Peter refers to "the Bible as coming from God's good hand as Editor-in-Chief, coming through human hands" (C, 188: 325-326).[133] More important than this is a notable general sense amidst churchgoers that the production mechanisms seem not just vitally important in the Church as Christianity's Sacred Text *sine qua non*, but because it appears to be personally linked to God in a foundational sense over and above that. "I mean it is divinely inspired," as Lily revealed to me in an interview discussion, because "… otherwise it wouldn't be much use!" (C, 172: 403-404).

This notion of divine inspiration was something commonly mentioned in this study, and some churchgoers expressed an especially strong position on this. A bit like Peter's biblically divine Editor-in-Chief, Samuel also believes that God actually "led people to write" the Bible (C, 253: 591-592). Similarly, Cathie declares that "it's God written, you know" (C, 279: 618). Being both God-written and divinely inspired, the Bible, she believes, can keep Christians "grounded" through its provision of definite assurances: "if [something] doesn't line up with Scripture then, basically, it's not of

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131 Various churchgoers in interview and focus group discussions also commented similarly on this point, as seen, for instance, in the words of Bryony (B, 124: 160-167), Ryan (B, 89: 338-339), Deirdre (C, 299: 629-632), Lizzie (B, 135: 538-540), Jess (B, 130: 361-363), and Emma (C, 53: 276-280).

132 While underlining the Bible's high importance, John, nonetheless, also toils with its contextual anachronisms: "you have to see the Bible as paramount. You cannot pick and choose, but equally … if I'm not contradicting myself, you have to allow for … situations that were … peculiar to a certain time" (C, 209: 683-686).

133 Peter was a bit wary of calling it too "mechanistic" all the less, explaining further that, just as "human hands write in different ways, in different styles," then it is important to remember that "the Apostles and the Prophets and the Psalmists were not synchronized typewriters or synchronized email stations" (C, 188: 316-317, 320-322).

God" (C, 279: 628), she asserts.[134] "I believe it's divinely inspired," Cathie explained, but, "… to be quite honest, whether it was Paul or his companion or whoever or Mrs Bloggs down the road, it was God-given to put in there" and that is all that matters (C, 277: 528-530):

> … it's all God-breathed, it's all God inspired and it's all God-given, for to be in there. So I really don't care who wrote it. I know God wrote it. At the end of the day, he gave the words and the Spirit inspired it and gave to the people who wrote (C, 277: 535-538).

Whilst not everyone would say, as Cathie does, that "God wrote it," churchgoers' ideas about the extent to which God is personally involved in the Bible appear as variations gathered beneath the umbrella concept of God-inspiration mentioned above; and, with trails that leave the Bible looking at least solidly accepted, if not essential.[135] For instance, Howard is "not too worried" about the mechanisms of biblical literality as an example because, as he explains, "I think the important thing is to say the Bible is inspired by God, and a lot of these other side issues fall away if you accept that" (B, 49: 309-312). In this sense, God's inspiration, as it relates to the Bible, exists at a basic and assumed level, and it is a trajectory in which God's engaged involvement with the Bible also ensures a place for God's own acceptance of the biblical text.

Yet, occasionally lingering questions still remain. During a focus group discussion which, at that point, was developing by way of a selection of prompt cards – each of which starting with 'The Bible is …' and ended with various options about what it might mean – Cybil zoned in on two of those and things developed as follows:

Cybil

> … Well, I think the two of those combined … the Bible is written by human <u>beings</u>, but human beings who were inspired by God.

Portia

> Their, their thoughts were coming from God.

Janet

> Yes, but that would suggest that everything in the Bible is true and it's not really, is it?

Cybil

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134 Cathie adds that, without the Bible's divinely inspired rules and instructions, "you could go down some very wrong paths and be easily led astray" (C, 279: 620).

135 Churchgoers' reading of the extent to which God is involved in the writing and editing process of the Bible varies, from the kind of strong position revealed in the words of Samuel and Cathie, to a more general idea that the Bible was formed by human words via God inspiration such as in the words of Emma (C, 54: 327) and Angus (C, 69: 348-350), for instance.

Well, it depends]// what you mean by true

Howard

//[Oh, depends on how you look at it! It could have, have truth

Daisy

What is truth?

(B, 45: 195-207).

The existential questions that emerged in this discussion relating to the issue of truth are powerful ones in themselves, and especially so when asked not just in relation to the meaning of the Bible itself but also to God's problematic relationship with it.

Earlier, this relationship seemed marked by notions of understanding the Bible as a God-inspired entity, with variations found along this general trajectory. It could be suggested that, for those churchgoers at stronger ends of the spectrum – positions where the Bible is more literally God-written, for instance – Daisy's "What is true?" question is already a non-question. This is because, in this kind of reading at least, God's relationship with the Bible ensures that it is automatically infallible, virtually perfect and entirely true; or, as Deirdre puts it, it contains a truth that is "absolutely, definitely … non-negotiable" (C, 298: 565).[136] Samuel, similarly, underlines the extent to which "the Bible proves again and again and again that it is true" (C, 256: 699-700), while Lily, quite forcefully, exclaims: "Well, it's God's Word so it must be true! God doesn't tell lies" (C, 174: 449).

Whether or not God tells lies or not, 'truth' is such a confusing word in itself, and Daisy's "What is truth?" is a haunting question. Even though, in another focus group, thoughts about it might have been read quite differently,[137] in this particular transcript the issues of 'truth' were themselves in question by Janet's important query, preceding Daisy's question: "Yes, but that would suggest that everything in the Bible is true and it's not really, is it?". Janet's enquiries of whether or not the Bible might actually be true or not echoes similar interview discussions emerging through comments made by Ruby and Margaret – both of whom acknowledged the importance of understanding

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136 This can also be seen in interviewees' comments on similar issues, *cf.* Julie (C, 231: 489), Iris (C, 113: 685-687) and Deirdre (C, 296: 516-518).

137 In examples from Focus Group 4 the Bible is considered by some churchgoers to be automatically true *sine qua non*, and, as such, incapable of being wrong. Bryony, for instance, said: "I don't think it can ever be wrong if it's the Word of God" (B, 132: 427; *cf.* B, 131: 393-399).

the Bible in terms of God-inspiration,[138] but who also, like Daisy and Jean, found themselves asking parallel questions.

Margaret's focus was on issues of reading the Bible's truth against the constituent forces involved in its construction: "I don't think everything in the Bible you should take literally because what on earth do you mean by taking a work like that literally?" she implored, continuing to expand her reasoning by saying that "it's storytelling, it's metaphor" (C, 14: 396-398). Regardless, in her mind the Bible's "universal truth" is still carried as "basic messages" that aren't "any less powerful" as a result (C, 14: 400; 15: 410-411).[139] Ruby began, similarly, by explaining that in relation to the Bible's textual meanings "there has to be a core of truth about living a Christian way of life which runs through it, that's true," before immediately following this statement with questions of biblical truth:

> Can't say it's all true, cannot be, you'd have to be an awful ... no, no, it just couldn't all be true, I think it's sort of a bit much, a long period after the events that they're narrating, and they will have been embroidered upon, they cannot be factually true, because it's like Chinese, there will be an element of Chinese whispers about it, things will have got embroidered in the telling, so I find the written version is probably, it's probably a shade wide of the mark (C, 128: 294-300).

Ruby's analytical take on the role of biblical truth is important, for the "written version" that she considers as having been "embroidered in the telling" is not a perfect original entity but a flawed kind-of-Bible.

Both examples by Ruby and Margaret reveal a measure of critical understanding vis-à-vis the biblical material, and some related issues presented themselves within focus group discussions too. This short section involves a dialogue between Maya, Kirsty and Fiona that re-inscribes parallel issues that the interviews discussed above had also revealed:

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138 Admittedly, although Margaret was keen to read the role of inspiration in the Bible, she was also patently aware, as she put it, that "the Bible was written by human beings, it wasn't directly written on a, you know, on a slab of stone up a mountain somewhere, you know!" (C, 13: 343-344). Similarly, Ruby also added that, while God inspiration could be evident throughout, at least at some level, she says: "I don't think it's absolutely essential that you read every chapter and verse of it and take a literal view of it. It's full of wonderful instructive stories you can learn from" (C, 127: 265-267).

139 This idea in Margaret relates to the located history of the biblical meaning – written "to communicate ideas, to shape a society" as she says, but in a way that "the messages are timeless but the setting is not" (C, 14: 374, 379). Similar issues are also found in transcript excerpts from Ruby (C, 127: 271-274), John (C, 208: 629-634), and Fiona (B, 11-12: 262-284).

Maya

Certain stories, I mean, they are repeated, slightly differently in different, aren't they, which makes me feel they can't be so]//

Kirsty

//[If the gospels can't agree, then what is accurate?

Maya

Even the story of the creation, there's two different ones, that … so that it's, what's actually written – the actual words, I think, are not necessarily historically correct, I would say, because it's, it was written down so many hundreds of years later.

Fiona

Even the gospels are all from such different perspectives and written by people who have quite different perspectives …

(B, 16: 409-419).

An excerpt like this is so revealing because of the contradictions that arose and developed within the dialogue itself between churchgoers. For me, Maya's contribution is especially interesting because of the deft way she conveyed the focus group's general thought (evident at various points) by allying historicity to the biblical material's question-causing divergences: she tied "the story of its Creation" to its "two different ones" in order to reason that historical problems "many hundreds of years later" were responsible for this. Yet, from the same Genesis issue, Marcella would have met up with an innovatively creative "woman-serpent" concept in order to agitate the text by playing with its hidden potentials for imaginative re-visioning, abandoning questions of historical credibility and misleading accuracy much further away than Maya, Kirsty and Fiona (and, earlier, Margaret and Ruby) would have liked.

In her work, Marcella appeared less than content in the explanatory business involved in tidying up the biblical material's latent 'embroideries' found in the tactics that Margaret's storytelling and Ruby's whispering might have revealed. Instead, in relation to the Bible she appeared much happier (metaphysically understood) ripping its fabric to shreds at times, and seemingly approaching the biblical material quite viciously. This contrasts with the limited historical-literary critiques found amidst churchgoers' reading of Bible controversy, the kind of reading which appeared to elide any real challenge of its ethical core. Patently evident in her writings on the biblical material's 'bad bits' – such as those "horrific stories of gang rape, torture and murder have been

part of our Sunday School teaching," for instance (2003a: 35)[140] – Marcella's position was clear: she was interested in neither eliding nor forgetting, and resistant to neither working with nor concealing from such things. Rather, she instead focused on decrying those thoroughly ghastly traits found within elements of the Bible that she simply considered to be very bad through-and-through.

In the following excerpt, Marcella offers an insight into the reasoning behind her hermeneutical position about the Bible's troubling bad bits (that are here called "pornographic texts") in this way:

> From this perspective, it is not that the Bible is a pornographic text *per se*. Even allowing the pornographic language and violent sexual imagery of a book such as Hosea, what is pornographic is the theological mechanism that has not allowed the text to move on. Texts are not fixed because readers keep moving and even strong pornographic texts, as Hosea is, can be read not for the purpose of making an apology, but to destabilize it in order to find the core pornography of religion (2002b: 93).

In other words, there is little purchase in altering the problems at the level of the biblical material itself, because the Bible is just what it is – good *and* bad, replete with possibilities at times while couched in closure at other places – and the real issue lies not with the Bible at all but the invasive theological system (as found within churches individually and Christianity itself) that forces certain limitations on the biblical material's interpretative options. Reading it deconstructively (by per/versionary tactics seeking alternative permutations) maintains an open lucidity for the Bible as a fluid text, one that is endlessly changeable and in flux amidst the irrevocable problems that are patently evident within those divergences. Expanding on this, Marcella later explained

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[140] Beside those particular examples of biblical 'bad bits' she conveyed in the above short phrase, there are of course others which Marcella, at various points, referred to. For instance, there is in her mind the serious problems attached to "the imperial project that is delineated behind the pages of the book of Exodus" (2007b: 27; *cf.* 2006e: 130), answering to the human cost (from the oppressed Canaanites' perspective) in the divine favour for the Israelites chances and successes. However, Marcella was also very aware of the Exodus story's potential uses nonetheless *so long as* its problematic elements are neither undermined or forgotten: this is because "we cannot deny the fact that many generations of oppressed people have intuitively identified themselves with the biblical theme of the grand departure from lands of injustice" (2007b: 27). In a similar way, Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, in introducing their edited book *Sanctified Aggression*, note that their purpose in the collection was "not to identify key minefields or trouble-spots in the biblical and post-biblical landscape and then to attempt to diffuse them, put barbed wire around them, or hold peace summits around them" because they instead wished to underline that the Bible's violent elements cannot properly "disentangle the victim from the aggressor, the witness from the perpetrator, and the 'good' texts from the 'bad'" in the texts (Bekkenkamp and Sherwood, 2004: 3).

by means of an example of how, if "the Church's eye is a pornographic eye which fixes the text of women," then "the text needs to recover its mobility and the contesting thrust of the bodies historically pinned down by sacred forces in theology" (2002b: 93).

Yet it is this kind of dynamic engagement with "the theological mechanism that has not allowed the text to move on," in the words of the passage above, that opens up alternatives not just for the (Church's reading of the) Bible, but also enabling possibilities of the unfixing of its God from within. The latter is what Marcella believed people, theologians and churchgoers alike, have a duty to respond to, people who could and must. However, if the Bible is not really the problem, but the way it is being read in the churches is, the trouble is that these kinds of radical reading of the Bible are understandably rare amidst churchgoers. As elaborated earlier, while limited questions at a construction level about the Bible's historical make-up may be found, churchgoers rarely offer a biting Marcella-esque critique on critical issues such as the bad ethics (and questionable 'God' perhaps) contained within its pages at times.

Of all the interview and focus group transcripts analysed, only one person made any overt comments about its 'bad bits'. "But I mean," Jean began:

> ... can we really say that all those awful bits in the Bible about slaughtering and not leaving one of them alive and all that kind of thing, can we really say that that's the Word of God? I don't think it so. Not, not … not God as I know him (B, 51-52: 391-394).[141]

On not finding "God as I know him" within ethically questionable traits of the biblical material, Jean's concern is revealing. It is one that reverberates with Marcella's thinking on it, for, like Jean, Marcella was always searching for an outsider-God who at times lived as a surplus figure beyond the formal limits of the edge of the text.

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[141] Frances also made comments on elements of 'bad bits' in the Bible, but Jean is more forceful in its critique. This is because Frances' resistance to its "violent, aggressive things" is out of a personal disliking to nasty things in stories and films that she finds just "horrible", things such as Jesus' crucifixion for instance (C, 150: 460-467). Related to this idea of very little lack of reference to the Bible's more negative components (and not just from churchgoers, but also theologians as well), David Clines has said his feeling that, even by those for whom Christianity might mean nothing, it is still often regarded as a "charmingly antique (but essentially value-free and above all harmless) document" (Clines, 1993: 86; *cf.* also Clines, 1997). Similarly, Yvonne Sherwood is mystified by the "collusion" – the "refusal to grate against the Bible" – which she has said, against its atrocities and shadow-sides, seems "astounding given, for example, the God-ordained genocide of the Canaanites?" (Sherwood, 2000b: 191).

But Jean appears as a lonely critical voice amidst churchgoers for saying this.[142] While fissures are sometimes to be found in reference to the biblical material (as glimpsed, for instance, through limited questions of biblical literalism and historicity), there is barely any critique at all of the Bible and its God *per se*. Instead, an acceptance of normative reading standards (*i.e.* ones that bolstered by God-inspiration) is at play in relation to the biblical material.[143] However, despite the party line, strong questions still remain amidst churchgoers at times. Some reveal that the Bible is a hugely tricky text to deal with, invariably bulging with complex, confusing and contradictory riddles.[144]

Traces of these kinds of difficulties become more noticeable in relation to questions of biblical truth, which, in turn, are queries felted into the mythic nature of the biblical material. Amidst a focus group discussion where issues of historical accuracy were raised, Howard shared his knowledge of archaeological evidence from biblical excavations at the site of the biblical Flood in a recent TV programme he had watched. The dialogue then developed like this:

Cybil

And I think they did the same with Noah and the ark, didn't they? There, there <u>was</u> in fact a great]// flood and …

Portia

//[Flood.

Howard

There was a great flood, yes.

Frank

Around the Black Sea area.

Cybil

Mhmm. But whether they, whether Noah actually had all these animals in his]// ark .... we'll never know!

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142 Even amidst the questionnaire entries that related to a question of reading the Bible as a 'Good Book' (App. D, Qn7), there would have been many opportunities for churchgoers to make contrary statements of rebuff about the parts of the Bible that they thought might not be good. However, as it turns out, out of more than 500 people who participated in this question, as few as 8 made reference to its questionable/bad traits (*cf.* App. D, Qn7for further analytical details). Question 8 also included a few related comments regarding these elements as well (*cf.* App. D, Qn8 for more information on this one, too).

143 More than just accepting a normative standard, some churchgoers suggest that it is in fact impossible to read the Bible alternatively. Julie's position in relation to its "intricacies" if, for example, that "it's God's Word. There can't be a contradiction. There must be way of resolving this" (C, 230: 456-458); also seen in comments by Siobhan (B, 136: 571-584), Deirdre (C, 297: 541-545), Alice (B, 88: 312-313), Lily (C, 174: 455-465), and Anita (C, 314-315: 424-432).

144 This was evident at times during a few interview discussions by David (C, 37: 701-706), Hamish (B, 22: 634-640), Fiona (B, 37: 1127-1129) and Murdo (C, 90: 368-376).

Portia

//[Animals in … That might be a nice embellishment! {Laughter}

Frank

Vegetarian tigers {laughter}.

Arabella

That story seems to be in, in all religions, though, doesn't it?

Howard

Yeah, indeed. The Flood.

Arabella

The Flood.

Frank

You can see why, you only have to look at the newspaper this morning. Floods happen.

(B, 56-57: 533-557)

The Flood story, itself, is a bit irrelevant to this analysis, but there's an element in this excerpt I consider important. That is found in churchgoers' apparent straddling endeavour between a desire for the veracity that comes from biblical accuracy in tension with an acknowledgement of the obvious 'embellishments' it contains, the kind of embellishment that summons and invokes Frank's "vegetarian tigers" no less.[145]

The mythic qualities of biblical truth in this excerpt opens up possibilities for reading the Bible more loosely, and maybe provide an alternative reading strategy for churchgoers that augurs well for potential.[146] Yet, as mentioned at various points already in this chapter, the problem of any such innovative hermeneutical tactics (even if playing at the fairly tame level of reading the Bible mythically) is uniquely tied to God's special relationship with the Bible, a Bible invariably considered to be churchgoers' God-inspired text. The nexus of the quandary pulses on this point. Inimically linked to ideas of God-inspiration, the Bible might still evoke subterraneous questions that languish somewhere beneath its surface, but so long as a fixed 'God' is permanently in

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145 As an additional point, this focus group excerpt also reveals the extent to which the biblical material reaches into general thought unannounced, apparently being a mythic (children's) story and thereby marking how insidiously biblical material can creep into the sinews of the everyday.

146 Understood in this sense, as Hamish in a focus group reasoned, this works because mythical features need not require that the Bible be "untrue" as it still is useful in "teaching us or drawing attention to some important factor" (B, 19-20: 543-563). Other traits of biblical myths sometimes appear at a latent level, too. Alice, for instance, is not actively reacting to any mythical elements in the Bible, but elements of this idea are inadvertently evident in her thoughts about science in relation to it: "I don't think the Bible sets out to be a scientific textbook and I think we're missing the point if we try and pin it down and say is it true because it's scientifically accurate or not is just a piece of nonsense, because it's not it's not intended for that purpose" (B, 89: 352-360).

place the Bible's alternative potential for innovative biblical re-readings are foiled by a systematic God generously supported by Christianity's standardized version.

For Marcella, the principle of people-first ideologies in her work always involved her desire "to let life circulate and only hang onto the radical principles in the Bible which subsume the rest" (2000a: 130), a tactic that itself enabled, by means of defiance through per/versionary reading styles, the involvement of "serious doubt as a hermeneutical circle, in the pursuit of a God in justice and solidarity" (2003c: 130). Between Marcella and churchgoers, important tensions have been developed throughout in analysing the permissible reading alternatives that might be available to both. These differences continue to be critical and the possibilities for alternative God versions form the subject of chapter 3. In concluding this one in the following section, however, another kind of radical interpretation relating to Derrida's thoughts on the issue of impossible forgiveness begins to re-imagine a relationship between the Bible and its God.

2.3
Unravelling some Bifurcations in Textual Ways

… inside language there is a terror,
soft, discrete, or glaring;
that is our subject.
Jacques Derrida (in Deutchser, 2005: 15)

It could perhaps be said that a bit like Bible-scrawlers behaving badly (as illustrated by those notorious gallery-goers to Glasgow's GoMA in 2009), Jacques Derrida has, similarly, made headlines without instigation for all the wrong reasons at times. This was most famously marked by a mêlée that unravelled after Cambridge University decided to bestow Derrida with an honorary doctorate back in 1992. Normally, when people try to prevent potential recipients of prestigious awards from ever reaching their acceptance speech podium, a considered campaign is launched justifying the challenge on grave issues of strongly questionable ethical grounds; but Derrida's case was not like that. Instead, and a bit like some Bible-scrawlers who un-knowingly verged beyond an installation's *intention* that writing must be limited to nice things like tidy names on untold margins and little else, Derrida did nothing any more impermissible than writing texts in a different way.

The controversy erupted with a letter to the *Times* in which a collocation of analytical philosophers (headed by Barry Smith) urged Cambridge University to rethink the conferred honour on such grounds that Derrida, while an original writer, must be considered a decidedly unacceptable candidate for the heady philosophical esteem of the offered degree: "Such originality does not lend credence to the idea that he is a suitable candidate" was the suggestion promoted by his critics at the time (Smith *et al*, 1992, May 9). The charges placed stated a belief that Derrida was simply unplaced in the lofty corridors of (proper and pure) analytical philosophy: he might write stylistically poetic things full of clever "tricks and gimmicks" conveyed in a manner that "defies comprehension" but those qualities lack the "accepted standards of clarity and rigour" required by true scholarship.[147] In other words, if Derrida's work was in the realm of

[147] Derrida had in fact borne the brunt of criticism throughout his academic life, far beyond this particular circumstance. In fact, even after his death, as Drucilla Cornel reported in a revealing essay, she was "shocked, if not horrified, by some of the brutal reactions to Derrida's

naughty scribbles over the fine texts of the analytical-philosophy-Bible, he had riskily dared to unexpectedly shake up a seemingly predetermined limit perimeter while simultaneously failing to cross t's and dot i's.[148]

But, fortunately, reading against the intention of apparent ideologies can say far more about the limit-setters than about the actual test-case: The GoMA Bible tale, for instance, conveys far more about Clarke's intention for her installation than it does about the actual words written in biro on the paper itself; and, similarly, Derrida's detractors inadvertently reveal much more about their own wary risk-assessments in reining philosophical thinking into a careful box with rigid edges, and, for fear of aberrant texts escaping loose on the run, fixing it tightly closed with a strong lid. So decried at the time by Smith's fractious letter supporters, Derrida's writing style still embodies those textual openings that more close-minded systems (like some philosophies and theologies) have such a hard time dealing with.

Texts in Derridean thinking always "contain hidden and unexpected reserves, points of inner resistance, dialogues and alternatives" as Penelope Deutscher has said (Deutscher, 2005: *xii*). His drive was perpetually invested with potential, forever interested in possibilities (and impossible possibilities most of all) and, like Marcella's, they moved in a deeply affirmative way. Both were playful thinkers, fittingly able to run rings around the obviously straightforward while climbing endlessly through disseminating apparatus incapable of fixing the finality of stable answers.[149] Derrida conveyed this through (superficially empty) conceptual things like gaps, traces and spaces that could reinvent themselves, at an imaginative level, into beacons of promise

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death, from headlines such as 'Why I do not mourn Derrida,' to long, winding attacks on why Derrida and deconstruction simply do not matter. What was, and remains, so frightening about the name of Derrida that it triggered a specific kind of brutality directed at him even in death? Perhaps it is precisely because Derrida dared to insist on a future to insist, indeed, that there can always be a future despite efforts to shut it down …" (Cornell, 2005: 68).

[148] Derrida's honorary doctorate was, in the end, award by Cambridge University - and by a ballot of 336 to 204 ("The Economist", 2004, October 21).

[149] While Derrida and Marcella shared a common quest in the business of opening things up from points of closure (and they are both still doing so in the potential ideas of their texts), there are subtly alternative differences in Marcella's and Derrida's deconstructive agendas. If, in Derrida, "questioning the unity of language itself … radically opens up textuality" (Spivak in Derrida, 1976: *lxxiv*), Marcella's questions begin less with the focus of deconstructive texts themselves (complete with their endless inside/outside challenges agitating presence found within and between them) and instead extends it by marking a pursuit of the possibilities of God. Although arrived at through the possibilities of the deconstructive agenda admittedly, she always began with theologically loaded 'who is God?-type' questions before deconstruction's literary textual semantics *per se*.

as discussed in the previous chapter; and these ideas – involved in fully "coping with the flux, tracing out a pattern in a world of slippage" (Caputo, 1988: 37) – are carried forward more specifically into thoughts on the idea of 'text' in this one.

"The text is," as Derrida has said in his first major book, *Of Grammatology*, "no longer the snug airtight insider of an interiority or an identity-to-itself" (1981a: 36). Instead, and following Nicholas Royle's summary, deconstructive texts are deeply "attentive to the manner in which each of the meanings [a text] might be considered to bear is possible only on the basis of what remains unthought and yet within it" (Royle, 2000a: 56). What this thorny 'text' word might mean reaches for further deliberation.

A bit like some phrases causing problems for Cambridge analytical philosophers twenty years ago, another one of Derrida's – "there is nothing outside of the text" – has become an idiom that is also quickly dismissed at a popular level, and often by those who haven't yet tried to read much about deconstruction. Directly addressing this misconception in a seminar entitled 'Life After Theory' in 2003, Derrida explained that 'text' in deconstruction is a much bigger, far-reaching concept than the short simple idea that black words on blank paper belies: "When I said there is 'nothing outside of the text' I didn't mean text in the sense of what is written in a book," he has said and, as such, "… 'text' is not just, say, literature or philosophy but life in general" (Derrida, 2003b: 27). He continues his explanatory summary by direct reference to the seminar's title, saying that "Life after theory is a text. Life is a text, but then we have to change the rules, change the concept of text and this is what I try to do" (Derrida, 2003b: 27). This echoes those strong moments of insistence from Marcella that life – the lives of people-first (and God-first) thinking – usurps any other theological premise. This instance is a clarion call for, and a movement towards, impossible justice.

Throughout deconstruction, not only are texts always openly disseminating but *différance* is also written into every and all texts – preceding and overflowing the gaps.[150] Traces (being ghostly forces of alterity, the very lifeblood of *différance*) mark the differences in the gaps. These are gaps which breach fluid spaces between ubiquitous texts everywhere and all the time - including those of ordinary people and everyday situations, encompassing, for instance, material Bibles and biblical material, and perhaps

[150] In this sense, it is the role of *différance* to account for the fact that "there are no simple, unsignified, transcendental signifiers that fix and warrant the meaning of our words, [and] that there are no originals to which out words can refer" (Biesta, 2001b: 42).

also reading the gaps of theological possibilities for rethinking God. These gaps are the unending possibilities that stymie closure, marked by traces of a:

> … differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) (Derrida in Royle, 2003: 84).

They are "not submerging or drowning" because *différance* – in the form of differential traces – are always in an alert role, denying "undifferentiated homogeneity" any place by forever enabling possibilities. In collaboration with Marcella's optimism, which always heralds freedom, Derrida's verve for these disseminating (im-)possibilities of unlocking texts shapes the intertex of this entire thesis. In what remains of this thematic chapter specifically, a creative reading thinks through the idea of God forgiving the Bible for its limited 'God' by analysing what a deconstructive rewriting of releasing God from the Bible's 'God' could possibly entail.

It is a truism of deconstruction that "texts deconstruct *themselves* by themselves" (Derrida in Deutscher, 1997: 113) and this is as equally true of the Bible as any other. There is a fluidity about the independent role *différance* takes in wending itself on auto-pilot into and between texts, moving within and among all that is, overlapping everything. If Marcella had, as she did, a strong ideological vision of her possibilities for an alternative Christian God, that 'God' of her deconstructive imaginings was a disseminating text – it might be called a text/God - that pre-existed in the deconstructive possibilities of *différance* long before her thoughts about that God of her imagination was formed. Her text/God, deconstruction's text/God, is an incalculable and open version that – like *différance* itself – is never-ending and unceasing, wholly incapable of moving "toward something other than it, toward a referent" (Derrida, 1997 [1976]: 158). Marcella's transgressive text/God is very unlike realism's ontologically known entity, a historically biblically-based God-with-fixed-origins living in a metaphysical castle. In this sense, Indecent Theology's openly revisioned God concept is entirely contrary to the Church's locked-in version of a stable biblical God.[151]

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[151] Inadvertently, it would be easy to create an unhelpful hierarchy between academia's Indecent Theology (good) God and churchgoers' Church (bad) God, but the outlook of this particular investigation is not to create a value dyad, but rather to pose an illustrative agenda that focuses on the tensions between these two alternative positions that are read together along shared themes. The issues are more complex than a simple binary division could allow anyway.

While Derrida's work never openly focused in any sense on God in quite the decisive way that Marcella's did, there are, nonetheless, fissions of critically relevant points within his thinking at times.[152] Forgiveness was a persistent meta-theme for Derrida, one of those vital concepts (like hospitality, justice, the gift and the event) that ably wrapped up the impossibility of limited possibilities, marking not just impossibilities but *the* impossible: "Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising," Derrida insisted, for "it *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible" (Derrida, 2001a: 32).[153] It is always already much more than a reduction "to amnesty or to amnesia, to acquittal or prescription" (Derrida, 2001a: 45). By this Derrida meant that:

> … forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive. There is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible (2001a: 32).

In this sense, by getting beyond limited versions of what it might mean, and as Derrida once said, "by impossibilizing itself, so to speak," forgiveness reaches into "… the infinite endurance of the im-possible as impossible" (Derrida, 2001b: 48). Forgiveness is, like those other terms which test the meaning of possibilities, a confusingly complex concept of the impossible that "must plunge, but indelibly, into the night of the unintelligible" (Derrida, 2001: 49).

This sense of exception and unintelligibility attached to issues of forgiveness in Derrida's thinking was underscored in an important essay by Regina M. Schwartz, entitled "Questioning Narratives of God" (in Derrida, 2001c). In the discussion that formed the dialogue transcribed for this essay, Schwartz asked Derrida the question outright: "Can you forgive God? Is that a question that we can ask?" (2001c: 60). And Derrida said this in his reply:

> Now I turn to the phrase 'forgiving God' We know that we, especially the Jews, often make God appear before a court. After the Shoah, there were

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[152] Nonetheless, as Yvonne Sherwood has pointed out in our discussions of the links between Marcella and Derrida in this particular study, Derrida's writing has often carried, as she puts it, a "surprising 'religious' lexicon" nonetheless (*cf.* also Sherwood, 1996; 2000a; ed. 2004a; and Sherwood and Hart, 2005).

[153] A concise quote detailing the mechanism of the meaning of forgiveness in Derrida's works might be: "If I forgive the forgivable, I don't forgive. If I forgive what is possible to forgive, I don't forgive. So in order to give or to forgive, I have to go through the experience of the impossible, I have to forgive the unforgivable, to take this example, and to give what I don't have, what I cannot give" (Derrida in Patton and Smith, 2002: 63).

> scenarios in which some Jewish communities called upon God to appear and to respond, to account for his misdeeds. But even without these theatrical and sometimes unbelievable scenarios, we are constantly trying to judge God, nevertheless the movement to evaluate God ethically, trying to understand the will and the strategies and designs of God, is a way of judging him. Finally, the believers are those who think that they do not have the right to judge, that a priori they forgive God for whatever God does. I am not sure that all the believers do that constantly. The people who have faith in God – since faith is not certainty and since faith is a risk – are also the people who are constantly tempted not to forgive God, tempted to accuse or to denounce God. That is part of the risk of faith. I am sure that we are constantly struggling with the temptation to judge God, constantly (Derrida, 2001c: 61).

This paragraph is an incisive analysis in which Derrida related to the scenario where, in the aftermath of the Shoah (itself now forever lodged in human history), God was required (either through request or insistence) to "account for his misdeeds" in relation to perhaps the most powerful of all places in which any person might ask meaningful questions of God's role and responsibility.

Can you forgive God? – Schwartz's initial question to him was already a powerful one: Derrida pursued it by invoking the question of people's "movement to evaluate God ethically, trying to understand the will and the strategies and designs of God is a way of judging him," as revealed above. To shift the themes somewhat, a sense of ethically evaluating the role of the Bible has unravelled between churchgoers and Marcella, one where the Bible, as earlier understood in this question, is found in the strong ties that makes it a God-inspired entity in the Church. As such, the Derridean links seem closely uncanny and quite revealing.[154]

When Derrida analyses God in terms of words like 'ethics', 'strategies', 'design', and 'will' in the passage above, similar echoes can be found in both Marcella's and churchgoers' questions related to the Bible, even if the tone of their composition pieces differ; and if, as Derrida's earlier analysis also suggested, "the believers are those who think that they do not have the right to judge, that a priori they forgive God for whatever God does," a strange ring is heard in the stratum between churchgoers' loud comments about God's approving relationship with the Bible in a way that clashes ruthlessly with Marcella's alternative indecent tone.

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[154] Derrida has himself said that "you invent the rule when you read the text in a way which produces another rule responding to the text, or countersigning the text. This is very dangerous and you have no guarantees. An ethics with guarantees is not an ethics … Ethics is dangerous" (Derrida, 2003b: 39).

For, in Marcella, God is the principal player, always coming out top just like people-first theologies; the Bible is a fragmentarily utilised entity languishing in places below God in Marcella's value echelon. The Bible is contained by its own inimical limits, accessorized along the way by its constricted 'God' version that should be sensibly traded for a much larger and ever open indecent God after hours. In those alleyways, something like 'can you forgive God?' might holler insistent questions into the night: but answering might be a futile engagement without first working out to which God version the question should apply.

To deconstruct the questions further, a flit from 'can you forgive God?' to 'can you forgive the Bible?' is timely. If there is a God beyond the Bible's 'God' entity then perhaps the Bible is itself on trial for its limited misrepresentations of a 'God' that forever exceeds who God – *i.e.* one outside of biblical strictures – might be found living within revisionary spaces. God is victim, not perpetrator, in this scenario by pondering on whether or not the Bible can be forgiven for containing limited 'God' versions. What would be gained from such an outlook is the freeing kind of deconstructive impulse present in the writing of Marcella and Derrida – found in their words and concepts, ideas and systems – and thereby releasing potentials for God (with traces, without ontology) into more openly free thinking.

These are impossible questions, imaginative impossibilities, "a madness of the impossible" (2001: 45) as Derrida might have said; an impossible possibility that is "an intensification, driving forgiveness to the most extreme possibility, impelling forgiveness to the possibility of the impossible" (Derrida in Caputo, Dooley and Scanlon, 2001: 4-5). If the idea of a re-imagined God forgiving the Bible for its limited 'God' version subsists then it is already loiters around in senseless non-places of impossibility.[155] Such issues reach out from the present queries (centred around the Bible especially) and into the next chapter with even more force in considering revisionary potential of re-writing places available to the Church's God.

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[155] There is impossible forgiveness at such sense-less points "when there is no hint of a deal, no sign from the other side that they intend to keep the peace, no sign of equilibrium … when it makes no sense to grant or expect forgiveness, … [and] when it is unimaginable." (Derrida in Caputo, Dooley and Scanlon, 2001: 4).

3

Performance Anxieties: Identity politics of divinities

If something happens to God, it implies some vulnerability in God. Absolute power is also total insensitivity, total impassibility with regards to an event. Nothing can happen to absolute power, to the sovereign. For something to happen to God, God must be exposed, must be limited in a certain way, must be made finite in his infinity. The event must affect not only human existence but also divine existence … The event must be totally unpredictable, even to God

Jacques Derrida (in Sherwood and Hart, eds., 2005: 44)

Identity is retrospective; representing it entails that we can draw accurate maps, indeed, but only of where we have already been and consequently no longer are

Rosi Braidotti (1994: 35)

After all, even the God at the margins of many radical theologies has become only a lateral shadow or God-mirror

Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003a: 52)

[Deconstruction] reminds us that we do not know what God is, or whether we believe in God or not, or whether what we believe in is God or not …

John D. Caputo (1997a: 150)

He is an old white man with a long white beard, dressed in blue, white, or lavender robes, sitting on a golden throne in heaven, surrounded by clouds …

Carol P. Christ (2003: 25)

Can a male Saviour save women?

Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983: 116).

Is it Derrida or the Bible that enables us to read God as, let us say, a gender-bending mess of relational inscrutability who refuses to function as a decent transcendental signifier?

Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2004: 298)

3.1
Of Coathangers and Conceptions

There is a birth that
Makes God depart from
Godself in Jesus …
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2005a: 399)

Famously recognised for his massive *Big Heids* sculpture which sits somewhere near Newhouse on that arterial road through central Scotland, the M8, artist David Mach is adept at developing objects which evolve from the ordinary, incorporating everyday things like red bricks into his *Big Heads* and forming from regular coathangers unusual objects like a Gorilla and, most recently, Jesus Christ. Formally destined for a more permanent position in the Edinburgh City Art Centre in 2011, Mach's Jesus made a temporary promotional appearance for a few hours one Friday outside St Giles Cathedral on Edinburgh's Royal Mile.[156] Larger than life at almost 10 feet tall, his face hanging downcast on even the tallest bystanders from a polished steel cross, this crucified Christ is entirely constructed from thousands of welded coathangers individually twisted and bent into shape (*cf.* Ferguson, 2010, July 22; Miller, 2010, July 22; Fraser, 2010, July 21).[157]

Officially entitled *Die Harder* (a less than subtle reference to his sharp profile perhaps, for Mach's Jesus is entirely surrounded by a spiky pincushion aura thanks to the prickly ends of his construction material), for the purposes here I will call *Die Harder* the coathanger-Christ. Speaking of his attraction to coathangers as a medium ("it's a

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156 This temporary appearance was on July 22nd 2010. The sculpture was intended to be placed within St Giles' Cathedral on that day, but, upon arrival it was discovered too big for the doors. In July 2011, this piece will form part of a collection designed by David Mach to mark the 400th anniversary of the KJV Bible (and, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, it seems that many people are currently finding time for such an activity). Although I have some questions about how well integrated a crucifixion sculpture might be understood in relation to the celebration of a Bible, it will nonetheless be interesting to see how Mach has plans to integrate his collective work, including "a large-scale limited edition artist's version of the King James Bible" incorporating "up to 120 new biblical illustrations, as large as 12ft by 10ft" (Ferguson, 2010, July 22). Not religious himself though "respectful of the tradition" (Ferguson, 2010, July 22; Miller, 2010, July 22), Mach has stated his interest in the long-term communicative potential of the Bible as an inspired message (Miller, 2010, July 22). But the role a sculpture of Christ has in this situation still remains a bit ambiguous.

157 It is interesting to discover that Mach (and his studio assistants) began the sculpture by first casting it in plastic, then allowing the plastic to be melted away at the end of the construction process to leave the hollowed out Christ as a standalone object (Fraser, 2010, July 22; *cf.* Miller, 2010, July 22).

material I use a lot for sculptures," he has said), Mach seems particularly impressed with the end results of the coathanger-Christ: it is by merit of these coathangers that "we've got the 'pierced Christ' that appears," Mach enthuses, continuing that "it looks like quite a violent image and I wanted to enhance that violence in a way" (Mach, 2010). There definitely *is* a fierceness about the coathanger-Christ sculpture, its sharply pointed quality forcing viewers to take a few steps back. In this, Mach could be considered successful in constructing the "powerful … personally moving … emotive" work he hoped to achieve (Miller, 2010, July 22). My query in response, however, is a question that asks whether such a Christ could be considered radical enough.

The limits of the coathanger-Christ lie with the realisation that Mach's Jesus remains locked in a very 'standard-version' closet. He is a crucified young man larger than life, but posed in a fashion known through too many centuries; he is covered in thin steel spikes which help to convey his agony, but this is an agony well depicted through history once the coathangers are morphed to blood, nails and screams of torture. There is a lot of consistency here. And I would suggest that even considering Mach's additions of contemporary apparel to his Christ figure (Calvin Kleins replacing the loincloth and a '90s quiff tidying up the Galilean haircut; *cf.* Miller, 2010, July 22) these features do little to annul this crisis of conventionality. Once such novelties are diluted, an age-old figure remains in place.

Of course, any sense of disappointment at the tame figure of the coathanger-Christ only exists *if* a radically different Jesus is what is being sought after, however - and certainly so far, there has been little negativity or approbation attached to the coathanger-Christ that I have seen. It seems, on the contrary, to have attracted a fair bit of positive interest during its short longevity, at times evoking affection, and certainly no discernable outrage – but then the limits of conventionality are not ones which the coathanger-Christ has felt able to cross.

Jo Clifford is a playwright who, on the contrary, takes shifting boundaries in her stride. She wrote a play entitled *Jesus, Queen of Heaven* for the *Glasgay! Festival* (held in the Glasgow's Tron Theatre) in 2009.[158] Clifford is an openly transsexual woman and her show featured her own solo performance depicting Jesus as a (newly returned to earth,

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[158] A yearly event in Glasgow, the Glasgay! Festival is a council-supported cultural arts venture celebrating sexual diversity, equality and LGBTI rights (Williams, 2009, November 4). This particular event was held in collaboration with *Culture and Sport Glasgow [Museums]* and formed a companion part in the sh[OUT] exhibit in GoMA discussed in the previous chapter.

with desires to be) transsexual woman.[159] Pre-publicity posters and flyers for Clifford's show "depict[ed] her as the Messiah, complete with crucifixion wounds and a halo" (Campsie, 2009, November 5). This was this very pre-publicity that appeared to prove critical to the negative reception that Clifford and her play soon received: for it was before the opening night had yet happened that the street outside the Tron Theatre were filled with a furious throng of candle-carrying, hymn-singing, placard-waving protesters noting their upset over 'Jesus, Queen of Heaven' – a play that no-one in the world had yet had a chance to see (Bruce, 2009, November 7).[160] As reported in the *Herald* the next day, examples of the demonstration included poster statements saying things like "Jesus, King of Kings, not Queen of Heaven" and "God: My Son is not a Pervert" (Williams, 2009, November 4).

The high level anger directed at a play yet to start was matched by Clifford's own measured fury at disappointingly closed-minded people – her fellow Christians, herself being a "committed Christian" (Brown, 2009, November 5) and a "regular churchgoer" (Campsie, 2009, November 5) in her own right. What right had they, she shouted, to use their own fixed prejudices to making claims of "assaulting Christian values" (Dick, 2009, December 9) when they had not yet gone to see the play for themselves? Clifford responded via media channels with measured precision to underline how virtually all of 'Jesus, Queen of Heaven' (95%, she claimed) had "the most profound respect of the gospel and the figure of Jesus" (cited in Campsie, 2009, November 5); and, what is more, as its solo performer and playwright, the play also has an integral integrity of justifiable respect for herself as a transsexual Christian woman. "I think it is very sad," Clifford explained to the *Independent* at the time, "that the protest has enlisted Christians who have difficulties with gays and transsexuals. I want to point out that this does not have any foundation in the Bible" (Brown, 2009, November 6; *cf.* Campsie, 2009, November 5).

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159 Jo Clifford was formerly known as John, choosing to become open about her sexual identity after the death of partner Sue Innes in 2005. She had previously been open only to family/friends (Williams, 2009, November 4). Clifford has stated that the play was written "to examine the roots of prejudice faced by both gay people and those who have crossed genders" (Campsie, 2009, November 5).

160 Newspaper reports at the time suggested a crowd in the region of 300 people were involved in the protests outside the venue where *Jesus, Queen of Heaven* was to be held. As a reporter for the *Herald* put it, "perhaps they expected the substance of the show to be miraculously transmitted to them" (Bruce, 2009, November 7).

Clifford's queer-Bible-friendly, openly-LGBTI-loving Christianity is perhaps as far along the spectrum of theological possibilities it could be from the evangelical kind lining the streets outside the Tron with candles, chants, and placards to criticise and condemn not just her work but, implicitly, the person she is as well. This play was never a risqué attempt to poke fun at believers' God and religious values; the resultant antagonistic riposte that erupted came from impossibly different departments within Christianity itself.

Whilst Christianity could be considered to hold a great capacity for alternative versions of its core beliefs, when things stretch into the sexual politics arena the cracks can often reach a chasmic level seemingly beyond repair – as the stramash over 'Jesus, Queen of Heaven' has detailed. Unlike the coathanger-Christ (something of a stale, safe bet despite being so spiky), 'Jesus, Queen of Heaven' was unstable and challenging from the start (and even so, as we've seen, at the preliminary idea level of poster pre-publicity). One final example involving not just Jesus but God too (though both in absentia, and no coathangers and transsexuals are involved) helps to re-inscribe this further still.

Probably as far away from Scotland as possible, this New Zealand illustration caused intercontinental reverberations that reached media channels across the world. Every December, St. Matthew-in-the-city – a progressive Anglican congregation – commissions a large painted fresco-style Christmas billboard to display outside their church. In 2009, the risqué subject was sex. The controversial storyline involves Mary and Joseph in bed, their bare shoulders peeping out of the blankets; a disappointed Joseph is dejected and downcast, while Mary looks wistfully heavenwards, seemingly unfulfilled. Running along the bottom is a caption that is far from cryptic: 'Poor Joseph. God was a hard act to follow,' it says (Tedmanson, 2009, December 18).[161]

It's the kind of motto cleverly tucked inside secular advertising slogans, the kind designed to infiltrate viewers with a commercial message through quickly creating laughs; and St. Matthew-in-the-city unquestionably (albeit more evangelically) wanted to similarly raise humour as well as questions. But, in doing so, it appeared entirely unaware of how quickly people would negatively react. Within hours of being erected, the church billboard was creating havoc – the poster's bedroom scene was vandalised,

[161] The festive billboards for St Matthew-in-the-city are created professionally (by M&C Saatchi, no less) and they normally stay in place until after Christmas (Tedmanson, 2009, December 18).

and brown paint was poured upon those longing and pensive faces of its Mary and Joseph; newspapers had been contacted internationally and engaged enthusiastically in return, while the church's website was bombarded with furious comments, often from Christians and largely in condemnation; and lastly, on account of the fact that the church was no longer "prepared to endanger on public safety anymore" after a direct threat involving a knife, the Christmas billboard was finally torn down for good much too long before advent's climax (BBC world service, 2009). Archdeacon Glynn Cardy of St. Matthew-in-the-city said, with more than a little measured incredulity, that the billboard had "brought out a fanatical Christian people" that he and his congregation had never envisaged the poster could procure (BBC world service, 2009).

Somewhat stumped, dismayed and more than a little confused by the pointed public reaction, Cardy opted to readdress the problems with the billboard (which, to correlate, boiled down to the idea of Mary and Joseph in bed in the first place, never mind thinking and doing such things as were implicitly implied) and he did this by becoming personally absorbed in a media frenzy designed to set things right. Writing on St. Matthew-in-the-city website (which was, by this time, bulging with an avalanche of comments in their hundreds), Cardy re-inscribed his original intention for his now contentious idea in five succinct points. This Christmas billboard was designed:

1. To invite people to think about the virgin birth and the nature of God
2. To say that there was more than one Christian way to think about the virgin birth and God. Indeed there are many.
3. To promote the Progressive view of Jesus having two human parents and God being the power of love in his life.
4. To ridicule the very literalistic view that God is a male and literally sired Jesus.
5. To invite people outside of the Church to see a type of Christianity here at St. Matthew's that they might be able to relate to (Cardy, 2009).[162]

[162] Amidst the furore, Cardy keenly illustrated in his discussions with the media that the poster had found the right effect amidst at least some groups of Christians nonetheless, *i.e.* those who offered him encouragement, positively underlining that "the billboard gave them reason to hope that maybe there was 'room at the inn' of Christianity for them" (Cardy, 2009). Emerging alongside the noted negative comments on the website, they described the poster as humorous, playful, liberating, refreshing and a novel thought-provoking take on conventional doctrines; for instance, one person, commented on the problem of the biblical story's own questionable ethics ("Perhaps the story of the virgin birth actually is offensive, as it portrays a male god who 'takes' a woman and impregnates her before establishing consent") and another questioned the necessity of Christianity's biology ("Anyone with a simple knowledge of biology would know that a virgin birth is both impossible and improbable. More importantly it's not necessary") (Cardy, 2009).

To recap by further condensing his points to a tidier nexus of two, Cardy's ideas then involved issuing an ethical challenge to standard orthodoxy within Christianity (3 and 4) while simultaneously making open spaces for encouraging questions of theological possibilities (1, 2 and 5). During his Sunday sermon on the poster's launch day (back in those innocent moments prior to the riposte that would imminently ensue), Cardy considered it vitally important that Christianity finds enough capacity to challenge cultural stereotypes, such as a Christmas billboard like this which "lampoons the literal idea of God being a male and that God impregnated Mary" as an example (Cardy, 2009).[163] In his thinking, there is much to be gained from realising that lines may be left open for questions in seeking alternative imagining readings of the Church's (implicitly controversial) doctrinal assumptions, and in seeking a less simplistically straightforward, legalistically dogmatic God.

In St. Matthew-in-the-city's poster venture both factors collided fiercely and with force because challenges and questions are generally vexed issues for Christianity, churches and churchgoers alike, but the tensions are perhaps never quite so taut as those found in the dual realms of gender and sexuality as they relate to God-thoughts; and in Indecent Theology, those issues are written far more indelibly than most, reaching into the very sinews of its meaning mirrored in Marcella's imaginative forays into thoughts of queering God, of tearing God from the heterosexual male and hegemonically masculine problematic version of convention,[164] such a focus forms the next section of this chapter in collaboration with churchgoers thoughts on the same. If it could be said that the latter version of the churchgoers' God lives in the static, tidy, safe realm of the coathanger-Christ, then Marcella's racy, unpredictable, risky God option for Indecent Theology is much more firmly placed in the realm of Jesus, Queen of Heaven – and such difficult tensions are those that drives the challenging questions to come.

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[163] Cardy is correct in saying that the cultural stereotype that his poster intended to challenge the well-instilled fact of the incarnation that is "widely understood in our secular society" and is rarely challenged beyond the firm dualism of its firm acceptance or definitive rejection (Cardy, 2009).

[164] A tangential point, but Marcella's lecture, entitled 'Theology in the 21st Century: Sexuality, Poverty and God' (as St Andrew's Trust Geering Lecturer), was held in St Matthew-in-the-city and her influence on churchgoers at that time might have played some role in their church's later decision to come up with the idea of their controversial Mary and Joseph Christmas billboard (2005c).

3.2
Running Christology past an itinerant Galilean

i.
Identity Politics for a Creative Jesus

Systematic Theology leads us to believe that the
Christian dogma of the immaculate conception
needs to be preserved …
Yet, this is not true.
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000a: 84)

While her Argentinean grandmother's dressing table is probably a setting just as far in terms of aesthetic imagination as it might be distant geographically, there is an interesting point of connection between Marcella's recollection of her childhood memories in Rosario and the preceding coathanger-Christ who once temporarily found a place on Edinburgh's Royal Mile. Vividly, Marcella reminiscences her grandmother's bedroom which, as she remembers:

> … was a dark room illuminated with candles of the Virgin Mary, whose heart was pierced by seven swords, and the crucified images of Christ always bleeding and in pain. Reading stories from the life of saints, I, as a child, rehearsed some forms of their bodily punishment. I secretly avoided putting sugar in my tea, deprived myself of my toys and would not use a sweater even if it was bitterly cold (2000a: 153)

A bit like noticing earlier how the newly launched and apparently innovative coathanger-Christ turned quickly into an ancient standard version of the same (intending a violence parallel to Marcella's grandmother's Christ "always bleeding and in pain" through the medium of distorted spiky steel), Marcella's abstemious practices similarly echoed ancient practices in the tales of medieval women like, for instance, St Catherine or Sor Juana and potentially many, many more.[165]

But Marcella was not that same girl in Rosario covertly avoiding sugar and sweaters while looking up to ascetic Saints for advice forever; identities are not fixed in eight-year-old bodies and locked in a dark room, but, on the contrary, are shifting things

[165] This refers to St Catherine of Sienna (d. 29th April, 1380, Italy) and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (d. 17th April, 1695, Mexico), but there are many other examples of ascetic saints across various centuries and countries like these women.

always on the move. Even a coathanger-Christ (spiky in all the right places, but entirely conventional) might encounter some ferric corrosion identity slippage when its weather-beaten rustiness begins, over time, to take its toll. Thankfully though, people are more substantial than things like the vacuous emptiness of the coathanger-Christ's hollowed-out complex; identities in real lives reach deeper, and, fortunately, identity politics can follow a conscientization route in such instances.

This process is powerfully evident in the movement of Marcella's thoughts, already marking an identity shift from remembered childhood understandings of Christ to one later morphed into a far more contingent and at times playful figure in her writing decades after leaving Rosario behind. The 'Christ' of her grandmother's dressing table, complete with its haemorrhaging features beside a heartbroken Mary, might still have existed (in imagination anyway), but the contingency of Marcella's own identity moved her thoughts about it to an entirely different place. So, "when we think of Christ," she said in *Indecent Theology*, "we do not think about a man, we think about a God/man, a celibate Batman, batteries included to supply his head with that halo of light which we frequently see in paintings" (2000a: 114).

Marcella's Christ as "a celibate Batman" alludes to its artificial plasticity, a kind of airfix kit Christ figure that comes complete with batteries, instructions and a box. It is designed to quickly leave its production line without room for imagination in order to serve conventionality and normativity, fully determined to preserve the status quo. Its illuminated halo is a marker that it passed through quality control. Throughout this chapter, the possibilities for reading Christology alternatively are in question, and are developed through a tension raised between Marcella's determined wish to disturb conventional Christ-figures, and churchgoers, who seem less concerned that such radical revisioning is permissible or worthwhile. However, in this initial section, Marcella's desire to short-circuit those faulty simulacra figures known as conventional Christs will be extended first of all.

Marcella was perpetually in the business of chasing alternative options, and she never did this quite so vigorously than in relation to Jesus' identity, always pushing innovation to the limits: she unhooked a cloak from a coathanger so that Christ could fly once the batteries expired, revising identity potential along the way. Identity issues are vital in Indecent Theology, but, interestingly, Marcella appeared guarded about openly disclosing what the category 'identity' meant to her personally. Nonetheless, one

of the clearest of such somewhat rare identity statements she made relates to the transcript of an invited lecture in New Zealand.[166] "Let me start by saying," she began:

> … that I am a liberation theologian and I am still locating myself in the liberation theological discourse. I am a sexual theologian, a feminist and more than that, a Queer and political theologian of liberation. In this, my theological identity is defined by materialism … [and] that is to say that God manifests Godself in the gaps of official historical narratives but also, in the gaps of theological reflections and ecclesiastical history (2005c: 1).[167]

This statement itself conveys the complex, and perhaps contradictory, positions Marcella wanted to concomitantly claim, using it purposefully to open up not only gaps for God – as seen in this statement, and also mentioned in earlier chapters – but the additional gaps variant identity positions might also bring.

Of all these categories she listed, 'Queer' worked better than the rest in buffering (while still encompassing) the identity labels she collected above. "I stand as a Queer among Queers," is the identity she claimed for herself in an earlier essay, "… and for the presence of the strangers of theology to share stories from which a new, different face of God may appear" (2002a: 29). A Queer category is already in itself an openly ambiguous position inimically linked with possibilities of the potential. "The Queer subject is nomadic, unsettled and does not have a sedentary vocation," Marcella has written (2003a: 44): such an identity is replete with a voyaging outlook commissioned to make it "constantly on the move" (2003a: 44). And Marcella's Queer identity, in this "nomadic, unsettled … vocation" she writes for it, was a journey (oftentimes obliquely, though sometimes overtly) forever focused on questions of God throughout most of her thinking and writing.

In *The Queer God* (2003a), Marcella extended her focused thoughts on identity by the creation of a concept she devised called 'critical bisexuality' (2003a: 16). It was a term sometimes mistakenly referenced, by others, as a personal fixed bisexual identity in the same way that words like 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'transsexual' work: but this was never

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166 Ironically, this was a visit of Marcella's in relation to St. Matthew-in-the-City in Auckland, which, as detailed above, was the church that – more recently – create the controversial Mary-and-Joseph-in-bed billboard frenzy.

167 Marcella's claim of being "a materialist theologian" refers, in particular, to the combined liberationist hermeneutical themes that involved "the critique of ideology in theology" and "the understanding of the presence of God in history" (2005c: 1).

its intention.[168] In Marcella's work, this concept of hers is "an epistemological identity which considers bisexuality critically" (2003a: 15), a fluid alternative and enabling tactic useful for thinking through things; different thinking is required because heterosexuality is organised by "an economy, an administrative pattern" in Marcella's thinking that is fully "sacralised" in the Church, and found amidst "hierarchical, binary constructive organised thought" (2000a: 114) that are riddled throughout Christianity itself.

By its own ambiguity then, critical bisexuality agitates the idea of fixed identities, and in doing so makes the not-knowingness of indefinites diverse, open, instable and uncertain. In this sense, critical bisexuality is subversively disruptive and unsettlingly free in its identity politics commitments. So, since a theologian's sexual identity preferences are not the issue, "every theologian is bisexual" (2003a: 14)[169] in Marcella's ideology *because* "it is only [a concept like] bisexuality which displaces and causes tensions to the established heterosexual dyad implicit in the theologian's identity and task" (2003a: 15). It is an identity and task in Marcella's thinking that is most of all always an indecent one.

Out of this strategic position of thinking theology through the apparatus of critical bisexuality, Marcella arrived at a Christological reading of Jesus as an idea she called the 'Bi/Christ'.[170] Her Bi/Christ concept was already at play in her earlier book, *Indecent Theology*, long before her latent concept of critical bisexual theology was more fully extended and developed in *The Queer God*. Clearly linked, nonetheless, to her nascent purposes for critical bisexuality thought, in *Indecent Theology* "the question of a Bi/Christ is related not to the sexual performances of Jesus, which we ignore" (2000a: 114): the fact that "Jesus may have been a transvestite, a butch lesbian, a gay or a

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168 Perhaps in *The Queer God* Marcella clarified her concept of bi/sexual thinking as a direct response to questions about her (sometimes vague) use of it in her earlier book *Indecent Theology*. Analysing Marcella's Indecent Theology as a whole necessarily involves shifts between her different books and essays, and even in those which were more prescriptive in underlining setting elements, latent concepts are found across several before they are even fully referred to, and sometimes in disguise.

169 And assuming, of course, that "every theologian" might want to claim the "bisexual" title Marcella is prescribing for them.

170 Marcella's Bi/Christ concept is something that she described as being "in permanent dialogue with [Robert] Goss' own project" (2006a: 519, *cf.* Goss, 1993; 2002). Part of the dialogue has centred on developments in Goss' own work, with his earlier book, *Jesus Acted Up* (1993), noted for not yet being considered a 'queer theology' because "it still leaves the categories of lesbian and gay and male and female in place," as Elizabeth Stuart has noted (Stuart, 2003: 87).

heterosexual person" (2000a: 114) is irrelevant in itself, because it is the *possibilities* of all manner of unendingly variant sexual options that matter far more.[171]

Reading a Bi/Christ Christology via the concept of critical bisexuality opens Jesus up to newly expansive, innovative things by denying the confines of limited standard assumptions; the Bi/Christ refuses to be read as anything other than an open book in the Bible, a (messianic?) figure full of the potential of alternatives. Marcella's Bi/Christ is a Jesus who may still be the "script of God" (2001a: 247) but, unlike conventional classical Christianity's pre-prepared fixed assumptions of a permissible "conceptual Christ brought down from heaven" (1999: 42), is a larger figure enjoying the alternative freedom that unlimited (sexual) options bring out from living "outside binary boundaries" (2000a: 117). A Bi/Christ actively undermines "the perpetuation of heterosexual categories in theology" (2000a: 117) and Bi/Christology involves an alternative systematic for the Church and Christianity, a conceptual system on the move that walks "like a nomad in lands of opposition and exclusive identities, and does not pitch its tent forever in the same place" (2000a: 119) because it actively seeks to disallow identity death by closure.

By dismantling the fixity within systematic Christology's conventional and ideological categories, Marcella refuses to accept a compromised Christ who is made up "of clear limits and boundaries" that are known to be "found amongst the ambiguities of his character and the almost military precision and clear planning of his life which heterosexual thought requires" (2000a: 114). It is in this refusal that Indecent Theology opens up possibilities over and against the standardised traits of a perfectly exemplary and oftentimes unblemished Jesus-figure that conventional Christianity has provided as a permanently fixed, limited version. Marcella, in this sense, unlocks the potential of alternative readings of (the historical) Jesus by seeking fissures (via permutations and per/versionary tactics, as discussed in chapter 2) through deconstructive engagement with the biblical material; and in doing so she brings elements of novelty to standard Christological categories that, as a result, may discover how the unravelling of their Christ-in-crisis might just turn out to be a good thing.

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171 "The point is that," Marcella said in relation to Jesus' sexuality in one of the introductory sections in her later book, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, "we cannot read in the narratives Jesus's sexual options if he had them because probably he was also like a ritual prostitute selling his given, fixed construction of masculinity to the religious movement he belonged to in order to be accepted" (2004a: 14).

Marcella's per/versionary reading of Jesus is contingent on certain elements that make him especially human, those that ably present him on a trajectory of universal experiences "of pain and pleasure, of love and dissatisfaction" (1995: 144), someone who meets people, values friends, seeks refuge and community advice, learning as he goes, and gathering better conscientization along the way.[172] "Crossed by a divine madness and a sense of mission" (1995: 144), as Marcella puts it, Jesus was a good person carrying an identity marked by "a strong flow of generosity, solidarity with the needy and a religion from the heart and not the Law" (1995: 149). But critically for her, this "exemplary degree of compassion and courage" normally attached to Christology's understanding of Jesus are "features that may be found anywhere in the history of humanity" (1999: 49-50); and, similarly – like all human beings – those qualities were also replete with such normal traits as faults and limits, arguments and mistakes. For instance, Jesus was compassionate but he did not exude "what we could call a revolutionary compassion" (1999: 48), Marcella has said. His compassion was limited in relation to women, as an example, because he never became a figure "transforming women's oppression by an awareness raising of the patriarchal epistemology of his time" (1999: 48). In reference to this in particular, Marcella said that:

> … Christ never went further than a compassionate empathy. He never challenged the pollution laws of women's menstruation, for instance, or discussed the patriarchal institution of marriage. If that was beyond his historically limited consciousness, as I believe was the case, then we need a new understanding of Christ's messianic role for out times, from the dialogue with today's women (1999: 43).[173]

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[172] "Jesus' friends were not the *tabula rasa* of God," Marcella wanted to clarify in relation to the learning and revisionary potential Jesus would have found amidst those people he lived amongst, and further explaining that "they must have also had their opinions on religion, politics and life and they may have taught Jesus a couple of truths too. We all learn in community, even god/men. It is a historical law" (2000a: 113).

[173] This theme of Jesus' (Patriarchally) limited "salvific gesture" (1995: 149), in reference to the New Testament's 'woman with the issue of blood', appears in Marcella's writing at several points spanning a decade, and so was clearly a critical one for her. She was most concerned about Jesus' "suppression" of the woman's issue, because this suppression could equally be termed elimination (1995: 149): "Jesus did not acknowledge the structures of sin surrounding the religious laws of pollution and the conceptualization of menstruation as part of the patriarchal ideology that denigrates women's bodies" (2004a: 14-15). By getting rid of the problem rather than agitating the questions about the system causing the difficulty in the first place, Jesus, in Marcella's understanding, failed in relation to this incident. Marcella's position on the less-than-perfect political profile of Jesus put her in direct tension with Robert Goss, who wrote along similar lines about sexuality and Christology but who put Jesus in much better light (Goss, 1993, *cf.* 2000a: 112). Recognising the difference between her own position and his, Marcella said of Goss' that his "statement is somehow exaggerated (Jesus did not stand up

Presenting Jesus' "limited historical consciousness" – itself so meshed within "the context of his time, language and culture" (2000d: 60-1) – allows the kind of per/versionary readings Marcella sought to find in the biblical texts for Jesus and his "phallocentric perspective" (1995: 144). In Marcella's thinking, there is commonly an insistence that more potential can always be found from within Christianity's breaking points: the problem is never really with Jesus *per se*, but instead the result of Christianity's limited outlook that was too fearful to involve reading possibilities in a daring fashion towards the unveiling of new Christologies. Reading Jesus indecently "as part of an incomplete process of conscientization" (1995: 149) permits foraging a revisable Christ – a Bi/Christ – permanently in process, and always open to radical dismantling, a form of reading that starts by understanding that Jesus' life is already "hidden in the historical theological interpretation narratives" (2000a: 118):

> … Christ's historical deeds are too brief, distant and too heavily mediated from us. His resurrection is totally elusive, outside the boundaries of our religious imagination, but it need not for that reason be less effective. On the contrary, there is more possibility to produce an efficacious Christology with our creative imagination, nurtured by our own historical experiences, than by just following thirty something years of his life which have been reduced to less than thirty something minutes of reading in the Gospels (2000a: 118)

Through Indecent Theology, Marcella, whose focus on finding deconstructive points in the Bible in order to re-read possibilities from within the cracks it contains, has already been discussed in chapter 2. Now, as developed in this chapter on Christology, she is seen to have applied her revisionary approach to an alternative agenda for reading Jesus differently and applying to him greater potential than conventional Christianity normally allows. "This Queer indecency," that Marcella often wrote, and found so revolutionary, "leads us to take the path of obscenity, as a methodology, to find more radical per/versions of Christ" (2000a: 112); but the question for the next section of this chapter is a consideration of how much Marcella's radical principles for Christological revisioning are shared amidst churches, and with churchgoers whose considerations of Jesus' identity may involve a far more standardised escapade.

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against the forces who occupied his country, as Palestinians do today) and it is a fact that his historical consciousness, seen from our perspective, is found lacking" (2000a: 112). On the contrary, "Jesus' politics were based," she said, "on passivity, or submission, to the political order of his time" (2000a: 163).

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ii.
The Christ of the Church's Bible

Incarnation is, after all, an exemplary act of permutation which plays God backwards … God in Jesus was opened up to operations of change and exchanges …
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2001a: 246)

It is easy to come across Jesus at the movies, and sometimes without even trying: seeing the requisite films are not necessarily required. When Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* was released in 2004 (largely enabled by the might of multimillions and Hollywood fanfare), James Caviezel's face became its Jesus, a Jesus who commonly appeared in the film's extensive international publicity package as a ubiquitous silhouette icon in a downcast pose set against deep red tones, liberally dripping with blood from his brutal thorns.[174] Long before Gibson's incarnation of Caviezel's Jesus, English actor Robert Powell took on the job of Christ in Franco Zeffereli's *Jesus of Nazareth* in 1977, a role that he has never quite shaken off and is forever remembered for. Far less bloody than Caviezel's version, Powell's task in Zeffereli's script was to give a striking Jesus some piercing blue eyes that were trained, throughout, to appear unblinking (effected at the filmmaker's direction via make-up and clever cinematography).[175]

When it comes to God, a similar situation persists. Involving more than just a little artistic licence based on Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of God* (as earlier discussed in 1.2.*iii*), everything from full-scale billboards to ordinary DVDs for the 2003 film, *Bruce Almighty*, was promoted through that famous Sistine Chapel image of a now iconic touching fingers manoeuvre between the main players in the movie – Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey) and God, in the guise of Morgan Freeman.[176] And like Jesus, God, too, has made not just one but multiple cinematic appearances, beginning as early as the 1950s with that heroic epic, *The Ten Commandments*. Admittedly, God's identity in this

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174 Released in 2004, and under Gibson's own 'Icon Productions' company, the movie was issued a restricted ('R') rating specifically for the relentless "sequences of graphic violence " within it, an extent of brutality that causing worldview controversy at the time; *cf.* "The Passion of Christ" (2004) in the bibliography.

175 This film was a prizewinning multi-part miniseries designed for maximum viewing through TV, and details about this, and the efforts to create a particular blue-eyed Jesus profile are available online from the Internet Movie Database; *cf.* "Jesus of Nazareth" (1977).

176 Interestingly, in the 2007 sequel of this film – *Evan Almighty* – Freeman again reprised the 'God' role, while Carrey didn't appear in the second; *cf.* "Bruce Almighty" (2003).

one was a little oblique; it involved Charlton Heston famously creating the role of Moses while simultaneously doubling up as the booming voice of God during the burning bush scene.[177]

"From cinema biblical epics," wrote a churchgoer from Edinburgh, "I imagine God to have a booming commanding voice of which I have no fear" (#418, Qn10), and these four examples I used in introducing this section – a theme about thoughts related to depictions of God – were not randomly picked on a whim, but, rather, purposely chosen as examples of some entries respondents provided in their questionnaires.[178] In this question (App. D, Qn10), churchgoers were given an empty space in which they might write some words about their individual conceptual ideas about God. Like some of the ideas already offered through interview and focus group discussions mentioned above in chapter 1 (*cf.* 1.2.*ii* and *iii*), elements of a stereotypical 'grandfather-God' description were similarly present amidst the questionnaire entries. Selections of these are listed here:

> God is a bearded old gent who is partial to me (#005, Qn10)
> With white hair (long) and a beard (#077, Qn10)
> When I was a child he was a man in a white suit with a white beard (#274, Qn10)
> A smiling old man with lots of white hair! A bit like Santa Claus! (#324, Qn10)
> Man with a beard and flowing robes (#475, Qn10)
> A picture on the wall at Sunday School showed the head with flowing white hair merging into clouds (#491, Qn10)
> An elderly bearded gentleman balanced precariously on a cloud (#530, Qn10)
> I suppose your childhood image of God as an old man with big beard, bit like Father Christmas (#547, Qn10).[179]

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177 According to the Wikipedia entry to for this film, Charles Heston's dual Moses/God persona was nonetheless bumped to being just 'Moses' only when the film's credits rolled, with God's (critical) role erased from the list, *cf.* "The Ten Commandments" (1956).

178 Amidst other examples of God-in-the-movies descriptions were also some images from Star Trek and Harry Potter: "My image of God is like a misty entity in space from one of the Star-Trek series – an intelligent, powerful entity like a vapour but on a bigger scale, pervading the universe, seeing and hearing us all, knowing our thoughts" (#458, Qn10); "But I've always had a feeling about God – he's a person but I can't quite picture him as clearly as I could as a young child – a bit like Prof Dumbledore in Harry Potter!" (#471, Qn10).

179 An additional example of the 'grandfather-God' type that was interesting was a comment by one respondent who, clearly referring to this kind of image, made a point of differentiating between which artist provided the most appealing painting: "I think that William Blake had it better than Michelangelo," the respondent said (#336, Qn10).

The "elderly bearded gentleman" type picture of these examples sits at one end of a more general trajectory in Qn10 in which God is known (somewhat anthropomorphically) through conceptual traits that relate to fathers and grandfathers, teachers and those others who, imbued with comparable features, ably carry similar particularities. For instance, God is understood as an "ethereal father figure" (#135, Qn10) for one person, whilst others have, in the questionnaire responses, collectively invoked variant traits of fatherly elements to be found within the Gospel parable of the Prodigal Son.[180]

This kind of strongly defined Father-like perception aside, several further distinct categories were also found amidst churchgoers' comments of conceptualising God-thoughts: some respondents imagined this through particular pieces of written word and music,[181] while others revealed strong ideas through creativity and nature,[182] and quite a few valued finding glimpses through other people's ordinary human qualities in describing their insights of who God might be.[183] There were also some abstract, at times vaguely biblical, thoughts about notions of 'spirit' in relation to God, too (using words like 'vapid' and 'nebulous', for instance).[184] Nonetheless, despite the different varieties presented here, all of the above mentioned in the analytical process were still usurped by a single category – which was a Christological one.

The degree to which Jesus features amidst churchgoers' depictions of God lends itself to the idea that Christological concepts are premium: "I would imagine God as an

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[180] Since many pictorial images of the Parable of the Prodigal Son incorporate an older, often bearded, welcoming man this might not represent such a literary biblical image that it at first glance might appear. Excluding Jesus himself for the time being, other examples of biblically based story pictures mentioned by churchgoers in Qn10 were fairly scarce and limited, incorporating just a few elements from the burning bush scene, Elijah in the elements, and a few references to God as Trinity through some ancient paintings (*cf.* App. D, Qn10).

[181] Amidst those references music by Handel, Mendelssohn, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Mahler were included, and literature by C.S. Lewis, R.S. Thomas, George Hebert, John Milton and Alfred Tennyson. The anonymous and popularly available 'Footprints in the sand' poem appeared several times as well (*cf.* App. D, Qn10).

[182] In this category, the words used by churchgoers in describing God were things like: stars, sea, sky, flowers, plants, trees, hills and mountains, wind and sun and weather, rainbows, sunsets, lochs and glens, plus seasons (*cf.* App. D, Qn10).

[183] Various kinds of words were used for this category of human traits – such as hands and arms, babies and children, goodness in other people, human courage and exceptional kindness, friendship and love (*cf.* App. D, Qn10). In this category, one respondent offered a depiction of God as a "homeless, black, gay woman" (#342, Qn10) which, amidst the others, seemed unusual and perhaps making a statement itself.

[184] Elements of this category were also often written in a manner that, in some ways, denied the question itself by underlining how an ambiguous spirit-type-God actually means that God can't really be depicted at all anyway (*cf.* App. D, Qn10).

older Jesus," as one respondent put it, aptly conveying, in just a few words, the extent of the strength of this category theme (#176, Qn10). In the questionnaire comments, ideas of God-as-Jesus were typically depicted biblically, either through humanistic styles – for instance, by referring to Jesus-the-man healing, forgiving, teaching and challenging, mixing with children and not forgetting (by extension) himself lying as a baby in a manger, upturning tables, intimating the last supper and so on – or, more generally, as a crucifixion/resurrection representational figure, a cosmic identity perhaps, that naturally plunges the Jesus-as-a-human-Galilean person into the religious nexus that Christianity, in its essence, purports to mean.[185]

An important point made in analysing the questionnaire results is that, even though the question itself referred to God and not Jesus especially, almost a quarter of all those who completed a written entry to Q10 chose this clear Christological category.[186] On one hand, it is perhaps unsurprising to have found so many churchgoers describing God in this way, and it was probably a pre-emptive expectation, if not assumption, of likely responses. To another extent though, and also more surprising, was the emergence of two additional categories, the prominence of which I was less prepared for in the findings and which only really emerged through later analysis. Moreover, if these categories were to be taken together, they would similarly match the dominant role of churchgoers' responses to the Christological one; and, as such, it seems worthwhile to consider both here.

The first of those categories relates to churchgoers' descriptions of God-concepts as being mediated through human traits, often incorporating disembodied abstract elements found therein, and encompassing such things as attributes and feelings primarily. This includes intangible references conveyed through things like care and comfort, protection and guidance, safety and support, light and love, warmth and

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[185] Amidst the words written by churchgoers that I have placed in this category, there were several references to a couple paintings in particular: Salvador Dali's *Christ St. John of the Cross* and Holman Hunt's *Light of the World*, that is also known as *Behold I Stand at the Door and Knock* (*cf.* App. D, Qn10).

[186] In itself, the fact that nearly 400 people engaged with this question – which was asking for a written response as opposed to a tick-box reply – is nonetheless surprising. The strong Christological prominence is also evident in comments from churchgoers through interview and focus group discussions on a similar theme: *cf.* Kate (B, 19: 517-523), Frank (B, 46: 224-225), Fiona (B, 17-18: 467-480) and Murdo (C, 86: 255-263), for instance. Furthermore, Question 8 of the questionnaire study also revealed a significant Christological bias in comments made by respondents, and, although I am not detailing their comments here in this footnote, such information is available for further analysis in Appendix D (App. D, Qn8).

strength, guidance and knowledge amidst others (App. D, Qn10).[187] A few interesting examples of how churchgoers' in this category responded are listed as:

> On a philosophical day, God is my conscience. On any other day, God is a leap in the dark – with no scientific proof (#266, Qn10)
> He is on our imagination and dreams (#307, Qn10)
> It would be more of a spiritual presence – difficult to describe in words – more like an electric current that one can choose whether or not to plug into (#315, Qn10)
> Like smoke – everywhere, touching everything! (#326, Qn10)
> 'God' – a descriptive adjective not a defining noun (#354, Qn10)
> Invisible gap between spout and kettle and steam condensing. Invisible. Creatively powerful (#402, Qn10)
> An intelligent and omnipotent virus spreading its way through the universe – the master of probabilities (#486, Qn10).

Although referring to just a few of respondents' comments, this selection still indicates a more general sense found within its category nonetheless as one where the struggles to (best) define God descriptively exist in association with the creative efforts this entails: it involves churchgoers' sourcing of fitting words that might adequately match the personal God-thoughts they already instinctively hold. Even more revealing is that, for some at least, asking such questions of God appears to create a catalytic effect in describing God in a certain way, *i.e.* initiating one that, by its description, accommodates a particular 'who-God-is' version that is already deeply-set in people's minds.

Most clearly, this is shown through some respondents' overt comments in clearly rejecting a grandfather-God caricature in the process: "I tend to think of God as an 'all-embracing' presence around us all the time," one churchgoer wrote, as a point of reference, "[and] not as a man of genial nature sitting on a cloud!" (#140, Qn10). As mentioned earlier, the presence of the grandfather-God typology is so universally understood as a symbolic icon for (a certain caricature of) 'God' in Christian Scotland that it is already well instilled in the popular psyche: "a man of genial nature sitting on a cloud" is so openly accessible that this general knowledge persists – and even if it works as a representative figure of negative rebuff or rejection at times, as the above comment itself reveals.

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[187] The strength of this kind of idea was supported not just by questionnaire respondents, but also by focus group participants' comments on God characteristic traits as well – for instance, by Jess (B, 154: 1220-1223), Lizzie (B, 153: 1157), and Sandy (B, 117: 1335-1336).

This leads to the second of the incipient categories mentioned earlier which, unlike the first, incorporates comments less accepting of any positively-led connotations for God altogether. Perhaps the movement between both categories is best understood as a shift from issues related to how properly and responsibly God-concepts might be imagined in the first, to a strong rejection of any such things in the second. In the latter category, churchgoers, by instead rescinding all conceptualisations of God entirely, wrote comments about the unnecessary, unimportant and at times undesirable efforts to conceptualise God altogether. "No! I do not depict God," one churchgoer insisted: "a mortal has no true conception of the immortal. I do not accept a long bearded old gent in a white gown. Why should he appear like that?" (#025, Qn10). Meanwhile, another said: "I can't depict God at all in my mind. Once I reject the 'old man with a beard' I'm stuck" (#461, Qn10).

Yet, in relation to such questions, it seems that, despite the acknowledged futility sensed by some, ideas of 'God' are shown to exist, albeit un-summonsed, in churchgoers' minds. God-conceptions are never really eradicated nor erased entirely *even if* they are rejected as somewhat illegitimate versions best left brushed beneath the carpet. However (or whoever) the word (or person) 'God' is conceptually understood to be, such things already exist and are present in the ideologically-riddled thinking of the present scenario's ambiguities. As such, various versions of 'God' stand amidst churchgoers regardless, thereby marking a subterraneous conundrum deep in the midst of things.

Although the excerpts above relate to questionnaire responses in particular, similar thoughts are evident through focus group and interview discussions as well. In the latter, too, it is likewise because God-descriptions persist – even if ambiguous or faulty – that the earlier questionnaire's "long bearded old gent in a white gown" example remains active at conceptual levels in some of the comments that churchgoers' shared.[188] "The church I grew up in," Alice revealed, for instance, during a focus group discussion,

> … [had] no pictures of Jesus, even in children's books, there was no pictures of Jesus because we thought it was, we don't know what Jesus looked like, nobody knows what Jesus looked like. It's a distraction, and we thought we

[188] As already seen in Chapter 1, in the illustrative words of people like Sandy, Cathie, Murdo and Samuel, this is further reflected in focus group participants' comments as well, in the words, for instance, of Agnes (B, 113-4: 1180, 1188, 1204), Lizzie (B, 152: 1131-2, 1150) and Jess (B, 152: 1148, 1152).

> don't start drawing pictures of him, because we don't know what he looked like (B, 113: 1170-1173).

Alice's childhood memories of her church's strictness in actively eliminating common images of Jesus on the grounds of 'distraction' place her in a somewhat unusual position on this issue of God-depictions. "So many of the pictures you do see," she then said, now moving into the present day, "are either ridiculous or belittling or some sort of stereotype that you think, No! That's not my image of God - at all. Or not my image of Jesus at all" (B, 113: 1182-1186). But what's so intriguing in Alice's comments of the "ridiculous and belittling" stereotypical 'God' she rejects is that, even in saying so, she is inadvertently accessing an alternative version that already exists in her mind. As such, then, and by reading in reverse, finding Alice's "that's not my image of God – at all" as an antonym itself vetoes the God-option vacuum her church many years ago tried to preserve.

So, whether it might be criticised or valued, toiled with endlessly or cherished in particular, churchgoers' personal God-concepts remain fairly persistent, and very much in play, even if stymied or disregarded along the way. "I'm not at all sure, either," Iris began during our interview discussion, "if you asked me to describe God in physical terms. Obviously I couldn't," she declared:

> … I mean you've just got to, I think, accept … that God possibly realised people might have difficulty with that and therefore he sent his son in the form of man to live on this earth and to grow up and to live life like the rest of us, and then, eventually, to suffer and take all our sins and die (C, 114-115: 754-759).[189]

Perhaps what Iris illustrated by actively tapping into her knowledge of the straightforwardness of this soteriological standard is that Systematic Theology itself offers an even stronger God-concept than any of the others already considered so far. She continued:

> And, therefore, I suppose, the, if you have difficulty in actually visualising what God is like you've got, you've maybe just got to go through Jesus who you can visualise as a human being (C, 115: 759-761).

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[189] Even as noted through this interview excerpt, although Christianity permits a Trinitarian God, and as mentioned earlier – at the section entitled 'Christian God' – in the introductory pages, the hierarchy present in the Trinity places Father, Son and Spirit from top to bottom, with the connections between Father and Son being so tightly bound that the Spirit's importance seems to remain the much less focused element in discussions.

The aforementioned absence of God's "physical terms" in her words then underlines the role of 'visualising' the ordinary humanity of Jesus-the Galilean a couple of millennia ago by ably circumventing this lack and invoking a God-through-Jesus premise instead. As a representative divine-identity centrally placed within Christianity's Bible story, this God-through-Jesus umbrella is already an identity knitted inimically to heterosexual masculinity via a certain type of stable Systematic Theology biblical reading. As such, whether it be 'God' or 'Jesus' or 'God-through-Jesus' that churchgoers' might refer to, the identity politics the process involves still seems cushioned, if not controlled, by the restrictions of alternative biblical readings.

In finding the lacunae of divine options somewhat insidious, Marcella, on the contrary and with strong persistence, unravelled the standardizing rules of God's fixity by bringing a people-first premise to her indecent vision of God-thoughts. It was one where she found the everyday need for "a Christ outside the gates" (2000a: 116), by firmly believing that only a discourse of Christ in exile could relate to people in similar scenarios of rejection by the Church's inner circle, and of finding a limited God version behind its closed doors. Such ideas of alternative versions of God already evident through the developing tensions of chapter 3 are then further extended into the next section as one that again engages with the alternative locales between Marcella and churchgoers in thinking about God-possibilities through a Christological premise.

iii.
Queering God between Christological Lines

… there are many different conceptions
of God in the Scriptures that require
from us theological options …
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000a: 67)

"The inexpert eye," wrote Marcella, and in it implicitly placing herself as an expert, "reads God in Christ as heterosexual male, and not say, bisexual for instance, or intersexual" (2001c: 62);[190] so, while the inexpert amongst us might need a singularly standardized "unchangeable, stable" (2001c: 62) kind of God-version in Marcella's understanding (*i.e.* those bought freely by the Systematic Theology brand and securely pinned onto its classically omni-God-type labels), the true experts would clearly see that queering divine identity politics is a necessary thing. So, while Marcella in this statement is well aware that reading "God in Christ as heterosexual male" is the convention, there are many possibilities to be found that are already readily available within the God/Christ story; this perhaps begins with the idea that "Jesus himself seems to have released God in an irresolute, tentative script" (2001a: 246) and who, consequently, seemed to "struggle with an original God, otherwise incarnation would be a repetition" (2005a: 398).

So, it is by being tacked onto Jesus in this way that, in this section, the "sense of incompleteness in God" (2005a: 399) is extended as divine-led possibilities further still. As discussed earlier in chapter 2, it is always from vocational positions of critical bisexuality that Marcella's visionary places open up new possibilities; and therein lie the changes for (endlessly indecenting) Jesus by per/versionary tactics. In Marcella's ideas in chapter 3, what is found is a very human type of Jesus, a limited, flawed and fault-filled individual with a dialogic conversional-type personality who learns from all the complexities of "messianic expectations" (1999: 43) in and through people and places

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190 In her ideas of Christology, including questions of Jesus' sexual preferences, Marcella has pointed out that "the only thing that we know about Jesus is that he has been dressed as a heterosexual man by heterosexual theology … yet nothing seems quite so clear as heterosexual patriarchal theologians would like us to believe" (2000a: 112). Furthermore, this is the kind of connection between Jesus and God (in Marcella's reading of 'God in Christ' above) that allowed her to suggest, for instance, that "God in Christ was a God with an identity crisis, in all the good and revelatory meaning of the term 'crisis'" (2006a: 523).

around him at any time (*cf.* 2004a: 14-5; 2001b: 33).[191] Consequently, Marcella's "Queer God" (2005d: 272)[192] involves much the same kind of imaginative questions as those revisionary tactics that existed on a similar trajectory to those of the Bi/Christ, and, in her ideas, Jesus/God identities are opened-up quite radically.[193]

Christology, for Marcella, was the kind of Jesus-identity experience that is riddled with opinions and questions about many things, including those re-writing imperatives that relate to God too; for it is because Jesus, in becoming Christ, was involved in a popular conscientization process beginning with ordinary people (and not Systematic Theology) that God-thoughts could also be re-kindled indecently, even in the current day – the process is the same:

> [Jesus'] community taught him to be a Messiah in dialogue, with the limitations of the historical consciousness of the time. Christ may still be incomplete and growing with us, in a process of refining Jesus' limited historical consciousness and sharpening his perceptions, while we continue learning in community and re-reading our faith (2000a: 78).

With the ongoing roles reversed as life continually changes, and with people finding permission to trade the ideas they value most of all in the process of helping out with the job of Christ-construction, Jesus is enabled to be a challenging maverick Bi/Christ as a result. He was then, and still is, a 'Messiah in Process' that overflows the categorical possibilities of "what it means to be God" by leaving the options entirely open and outside-the-box (1995: 146; *cf.* 2006d: 113). So, what this then means is that God is an ongoing idea also, and an entirely open book too.

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191 It is because of this sense of faultiness related to him in Marcella's thinking that "repeating Jesus' praxis without challenging the sometimes sad decency of Jesus' own acts works as the sleep of reason which produces monsters. These monsters are the ones which end up reinforcing oppression" (2000a: 181).

192 Terminologically, Marcella used 'Queer Theory' as a definition, quite loosely, as "an umbrella term encompassing diverse sexual identities" (2004a: 143). Ken Plummer has likewise said that, in encompassing its indefinite meanings, Queer Theory "is really poststructuralism (and postmodernism) applied to sexualities and genders" (Plummer, 2005: 365); and Queer Theory also comes out of feminism/postfeminism, too (Beasley, 2005: 108). Comments about 'Queer' in relation to Marcella are mentioned earlier in chapter 3 (3.2.*i*).

193 As Marcella underlined in explaining the value of creating her ideas of *The Queer God* (2003a), while theologians have already posed "the Black Christ, the Gay Christ" *etc.*, it is (still) the case that "although the theological subject has been and still is queried and rightly destabilised from a prefixed Christian horizon, there have been few if any theological attempts to de-stabilise God, that is the other partner of the theological dialogical process" (2003a: 54-55). As she discussed in *The Queer God,* it seemed apparent to her that bringing issues of "a more plural and diverse vision into theology are related precisely to the homogeneity of the concept of God … [and] if God remains essential, stable, fixed and therefore non-diverse and unique" (2003a: 54-55).

For Marcella, Jesus' people-led identity manoeuvre relates to the radical Christ possibilities that reaches further in also incorporating "an unfinished God" (2006a: 523), as one who is a "non-docile" Queer version, not unlike people themselves (2003b: 184, 2003a: 153).[194] Like Jesus' community-Christology bisexual options – capacious of new alternative possibilities, and therein changed by all the risks of becoming disorderly – Marcella's 'Queer God' is "fluid and unstable as ourselves" (2003a: 171).[195] One who is similarly unfinished, fully contingent and open as "an alternative instead of centrality" (2005a: 398), this is a Queer God who also "stands outside the classroom definitions of heterosexual thinking" (2002a: 28).

A bit like Jesus' own conscientization-filled identity transformation, Marcella also seemed sure that, after adequate exposure and appropriate conscientization to the resulting problems, God's possible alternatives would similarly become openly available to churchgoing communities, too, and that in their midst God might similarly look like "a stranger at the gates of our churches and theologies" (2006e: 131). Because people always matter more than ecclesiologies, Marcella believed, very strongly, that Jesus himself was never the *bête noire* in the Church's system; on the contrary, Systematic Theology on its own, and in every way, was. It was such unwavering ecclesiastical rules in the latter that closeted Jesus and locked-up God as "a prisoner of issues of sexuality" (2007b: 38) in firmly static, fixed, limited and standardized positions that were much too decent; as such, indecenting God-thoughts through openly creative sexual varieties were myriad adventures all the time.[196]

Testing her assumptions a little, and reinforcing some assumptions of my own, questions of identity already involve something of a bumpy voyage for all of us; such trickiness begins with the latent questions of what, as an everyday concept, it could really purport to mean – and so, when I posed an identity-laden God-question in the research study questionnaire, it was not an easy enquiry from the start. Question 12

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194 A tangential point, but nonetheless interesting, is that Derrida has also said something comparable in his suggestion that "there is nothing original, nothing absolutely original, in saying that there might be some powerlessness in God …" (Derrida in Caputo, Hart, Sherwood, 2005: 41).

195 In backing up her position on these ideas, as Marcella has said, "the so-called stability of God is no more stable than heterosexuality itself" (2003a: 62).

196 In further explaining this, Marcella suggested that it is "when we raise questions such as whether Jesus could have been biologically a male without his sexuality necessarily matching it, [that] we are then in the position also to question the sexuality of God altogether: a new divine epistemology may then unfold" (2005b: 270).

asked: "In churches, God is commonly referred to using masculine terminology: Is God male?" (App. D, Qn12). Of the 470 churchgoers who responded to its tick-box options, 187 answered affirmatively, that, yes, this seemed to be the case, either by ticking 'Yes, definitely' (89) or 'Yes, this is likely' (98), while 162 opted to tick negatively, either as 'No, not really' (73) or 'No, definitely not' (89) and a further 121 left a sense of ambiguity around the question in ticking, 'Perhaps, yes; perhaps, no' (App. D, Qn12).

At first glance, and at least on one level, this summary indicates a fairly broad response from churchgoers in replying to my initial question, 'Is God male?' – and with nearly 200 churchgoers affirming that, yes, God seems to be male, this appears to further strengthen churchgoers' similar comments already evident in preceding sections of chapters 1, 2 and 3. But, on further analysis, Question 12's main problem lies within the design of the particularities of the query itself. This is understood through the options by which respondents could use 'No', which I now realise to be mainly a rejection of the topic question (*i.e.* 'In churches, God is commonly referred to using masculine terminology. Is God male?) rather than seeing 'No' as an option placed within a No-through-Yes spectrum; in other words (and omitting the ambiguous 'Perhaps, yes; Perhaps, no' option), it looks like churchgoers might have either ticked an affirmative 'Yes' or else, alternatively, a 'No' to suggest that no, God is not male *because* God is already understood as surpassing such identity issues anyway.[197] Already known by some churchgoers to be far beyond and above such limited human terminological words as male and female, gender and sex, 'No' was not really an opposition to the 'Yes, God is definitely/likely male' idea, but instead an option by which churchgoers could underline their belief that any ideas of God's identity issues are themselves folly.[198]

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[197] Marcella understood such ideas of surpassing identity in relation to "a denial of sexuality," by further explaining that this is the "classical 'evolved' understanding that God has no sex, and we need to move forward sexual representations of God as male, because we need to dispense with anthropomorphic representations of God in general … [and] basically, the de-sexualization of God ignores that sexual representations are at the core of any meaningful representation system, be it judicial, political or theological" (2000f: 217). Such ideas tie into Gerard Loughlin's thoughts of gender-neutrality, in which he explained that "when pushed most people will admit that God has no body, but they will still think that he does, and how could they not when they think *him* as 'he'" (Loughlin, 2005: 20).

[198] Churchgoers made interesting comments about linguistic positions in relation to identity terms used for God. Angus, for example, said that "because it's either 'he', 'she' or 'it' … the notion of calling God 'it' is, is just inappropriate," further explaining "that you can argue that in English, 'he' is a masculine pronoun and it's also a pronoun of common gender" (C, 73-74: 498-503); Fiona, who believed that such things were "of no consequence" and "distracting" and "demeaning" to her thoughts of God (B, 25: 740-742); and, Maya, on the contrary, spoke of

From our interview discussion, some words of Cathie's now help to illustrate the 'Question-12-problem' further still this is because she, on the one hand, explained that she "couldn't really say 'she' for God instead of he" (C, 278: 588-589), while, on the other, also suggested that "he is neither 'he' nor 'she' in truth. He is God" (C, 279: 609). Furthermore, during our dialogue, Cathie also introduced a God-identity question of her own: "Do I believe God has a feminine side? The motherly role, the chicken, yes!" she said (C, 278: 589-590). But against many more masculine-type words and terms for God found elsewhere in Cathie's interview transcript, this biblical support relating to just a tiny Gospel excerpt itself gleaning God's identity possibilities of the "motherly role, the chicken" vision seems to be in weak comparison to the dominant biblical viewpoint that places God as heterosexually male in Cathie's words at many other points during our interview conversation.[199]

At many points, Marcella also made reference to such kinds of inefficient "feminine style of God" concessions which she considered would always, in the end, necessarily "[assume] that the core of God's identity is heterosexually male, and femininity is just a side dish or an extra point of view" (2002a: 24). Convinced that unworkable God-the-Mother accessorising-type tactics involved somewhat pointless cop-out manoeuvres, Marcella believed that, surely, "we are wise enough to know that patriarchal theology likes to incorporate and assimilate change occasionally so it appears that 'nothing changes'" (2000c: 33), and that such things (like God-the-Mother) could never work successfully.

Because of the biblical options for God-identity possibilities that the Bible already sets quite unmoveable limits around, it is perhaps much easier for churchgoers to think more readily about God conventionally (*i.e.* from a masculine viewpoints understood in male terms) than to consider otherwise. For instance, would nearly 200 churchgoers of this research study have ticked a similar 'Yes'-type question if the

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her familiarity with just accepting what is considered convention in explaining: "It doesn't worry me, he, she … that it's 'he' or …It's always been 'he' for me" (B, 25: 725). About such ideas of how people often understand God as genderless in identity, Catherine Keller has noted in her understanding of such divine superficiality that "very smart folk seem taken in by the innocence of that little pronoun" (Keller, 1998: 226).

[199] There are only a few biblical lines in which God could possibly be referred to through feminine traits in the Bible, and this one (of connoting 'motherly role, the chicken' as Cathie puts it) is perhaps the most prominent. It relates to the statement of Jesus' found in the biblical passages of Matthew 23: 37 and Luke 13: 34.

identity-term was dyadically reversed to one asking 'Is God female?'.[200] I am convinced not, and the following excerpts from interview and focus group discussions seem to back up my assumption:

> I'm sorry I could never see God as a woman (Alison, B, 25: 714)
> I think God is clearly the Father and … it, it, it is completely inappropriate to describe him as a Mother (Ryan, B, 101: 747-748).
> I mean he's always he to me. 'Cause God came, Jesus called him Father and you think of Father as, as masculine … [so] I'm not very keen on hearing God called 'she' (Lily, C, 175-176: 515-516, 522)
> [referring to an example] where people have used the female pronoun to address God or call our Mother in Heaven and I find that, actually, quite offensive (Sandy, B, 100: 724-725).[201]
> People that keep insisting that God is called 'she' have just got another problem (Jess, B, 142-143: 806-807).[202]

Such revealing excerpts as these from a selection of churchgoers help to show some of the real difficulties appearing in their thoughts about what a God-identity option (*i.e.* through a woman/gender/female/sexuality idiom) might possibly mean.

As one convinced that "dogmas and ecclesiologies" are responsible for fixing God into "a resource for heterosexual authority" (2002b: 95), Marcella posed a much more radical exposition than the God-the-Mother version churchgoers were averse to, and she did so in naming her strongly subversive "God-Woman" alternative (2000c: 33), a concept unveiled with reference to the fact that:

> … we can deal with Jesus-God, and see divinity in his acts of compassion and wisdom. We can imagine old God the Father, grey and strong (still much of a reproducer) seated, like a benevolent TV evangelist, ready to pardon our sins and welcome us into his club. However, many people cannot image Jesus-Woman, washing her menstrual towels or going through all the indignities that women need to go through when they intelligently and courageously defy patriarchalism. Neither is it easy for many to envisage God-Woman as an old

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[200] An interesting debate between Howard, Frank and Cybil about female deities in relation to the seemingly irrelevant questions of gender issues as historically placed cultural accidents occurred during their focus group discussion, and it incorporated the reasoning that it is a simple matter of serendipity that Christianity's God ended up being a male one (and not a female version) due to a chance occurrence (B, 66-67, *passim*).

[201] In the same focus group, Agnes appears to be in agreement with Sandy in expressing her 'dislike' of the same (B, 100: 727), while Alice is concerned, not especially about any offence caused, but its lack of necessity: "to my mind it's making just an unnecessary palaver over something that shouldn't really be an issue" she said (B, 100: 744-745).

[202] Jess further explained in this respect: "I don't think they've got a problem with God, they've got a problem with society" (B, 142-143: 807-808).

> crone whose body has shrunk because of osteoporosis, heavily wrinkled with profuse hair over her now slim lips (2000c: 33).[203]

Such an image-filled idea in this excerpt is the kind that ably "complicates our symbols" (2000c: 33) by allowing us to repeatedly ask, "does the image work?" (2000c: 33); so, perhaps, it is by noting at which point the image *does not* work that conventional concepts meet their most productive comeuppance.

Given the important prominence of the Bible in the Church, the way God is seemingly inimically tied to the Bible means that any such questions of 'does the image work?' must necessarily relate back to Christianity's Sacred Text; and limited by such premises of biblical options found within it, churchgoers find themselves positioned in a limited place where God's heterosexual masculinity is perhaps understood to be the (only) norm: "Jesus never called him 'Mother'," Lizzie explained, for "... he said 'Abba Father', didn't he, all the time?" (B, 143: 812); "God wants to be called 'Father' - he wants to be called 'Dad' and I think that's important," commented Steve (B, 143: 833-834).[204] In a focus group discussion between Howard and Frank, the Bible's high status in its considerable value relating to God-concept understandings was similarly evident:

> **Howard**
>
> God is a God of the Bible … that you … that is the sort of … parameter in which we're … [---]… if we're talking about our God, the God of our faith, the God of our belief, then …
>
> **Frank**
>
> Got to have the Bible in there somewhere
>
> **Howard**

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[203] At another point in the same year as the essay in which she related to her ideas of God-Woman, Marcella explained the situation slightly differently, saying that "the problem needs to be considered from the perspective of women as fitting into the surpluses of male symbolic religious systems. Since the virtues of humanity are male defined, a God-woman definition will make of God a concept worked on dispensable, superfluous heterosexual meanings … The feminization of the sacred is not accepted because it threatens to destabilize the centrality of God, which depends basically on male-centric systems of meaning. If God is a woman she will be a woman from the margins" (2000f: 216-217).

[204] Julie expanded, in relation to such issues, that "what I believe about God is not so much from my experience but from what I read in the Bible" (C, 231: 507-508), before later saying that "I can read 'he' and, well, I think of God probably as masculine" (C, 232: 550). At another point, she mentioned that the only really credible reading of God that could be understood in a more feminine idiom might be in a scenario of male-abuse (C, 232: 543-546), and this was not an isolated case as it was a comment shared by other women churchgoers – such as those found in the words of Ruby: "Maybe if you are the victim of abuse at the hands of a male maybe that does do things to your, your perceptions, and God can't possibly be a man. If there is a God he can't possibly be male" (C, 130: 358-36); *cf.* related ideas in Maya (B, 25: 725-730) and Alice (B, 100: 738-745), for example.

Got to have the Bible in there somewhere

(B, 51: 365-373).

Keeping the Bible "in there somewhere" in Frank and Howard also matched elements of Emma's comments, too, for she also felt that there was not just a sense but, more than that, a necessity even in connecting God-concepts at the point of the Bible's language: "I think we might have a sense of spirituality without the Bible, but I think God is so entwined with, and essential to, the Bible, and vice-versa, that you couldn't – not God in the Christian sense" (C, 56: 393-395).[205]

So it is both Christianity's God and the Church's Bible "so entwined with, and essential to" each other that are the elements apparently working collaboratively in the process of churchgoers' conceptions of the divine; or, as Peter has explained during our interview discussion, while "it doesn't mean I have a telephone line up there" to get God-identity information, accruing a sense of God through the knowledge gained via biblical channels and believing in the Bible at the optimal point for it means that "God reveals himself as one … gets deeper and deeper and deeper into the Bible" (C, 188: 342-344). It is then understood as a multi-layered, deeply ontologically, God-containing type of Bible that churchgoers (in this study, anyway) seem to not only accept, but willingly relate to as the most important position in the Church. How (a certain conventionally heterosexually masculine) God might be understood then appears to be limited by the Bible's parameters found through such linguistic constraints are the topic

[205] In saying that the Bible "promotes a male-supremacist social and cognitive system," Esther Fuchs has suggested that "God is male because the Bible presents a masculine construction of the divine" (Fuchs, 2003: 12); and even though Angus, likewise, said that "Christianity wouldn't be Christianity without the Bible, to make an absolutely obvious point, and it has a central place in what we do, in our, in our belief" (Angus, C, 70: 392-393), he, unlike the others, later clarified in making the point that "it's a huge influence. Yes, yes. It's the Bible plus the interpretations of the Bible that you get in church. You can't divide it up very neatly" (C, 74: 532-533). In the questionnaire aspect of this study, respondents' comments relating to Question 4 and 5 (App. D, Qn4; App. D, Qn5) are revealing. Qn5 asked churchgoers, by tick-box options, to indicate their level of agreement to the statement that 'reading the Bible is an essential component in Christian worship', and a large number suggested that they either 'Strongly agree' (242 out of 549 in total) or 'agree' (229/549) with it. Yet, in analysing this alongside Qn4 (which asked for written responses to this question: 'Think of the last time you were at Sunday worship in your church. Which TWO aspects of the service most immediately come to mind?'), out of 1066 collective comments indicated in both of the grey write-on boxes available to churchgoers, very few wrote comments about the Bible readings themselves (33/1066). On the contrary, the *interpreted* Bible through the Sermon/Preaching proved to be the most popular overall comments churchgoers made (274/1066), closely followed by Hymns/Music (265/1066). More information about the analytic process relating to churchgoers' indications and comments in respect of both Qn4 and Qn5 can be found in Appendix D.

of an interesting focus group discussion. It was one in which Cybil asked whether language "gives us, do you think it gives us a … an unduly male idea … of God?" (B, 66: 874-875), and, as the dialogue proceeded, her question moved onto the ideas found in this passage:

> **Cybil**
>
> … I think the way we use language can then influence our feelings. I'm not sure that I think of God as … male or female. I mean, God is, I think of God as a Spirit
>
> **Janet**
>
> Yes
>
> **Howard**
>
> Infinite, eternal and unchangeable
>
> **Cybil**
>
> Yes. But he's maybe a bit of a male Spirit.
>
> (B, 67: 910-919).[206]

Cybil's aphorism (recognising God as being "maybe a bit of a male Spirit") sums-up, for me, the latent elements available in constraining possibilities of how 'God' (both word and identity) could mean for churchgoers. It is a position that Marcella might have alluded to as one to be found locked-up and "in the closet as a prisoner of the orthodoxy of theology" (2002b: 95).[207]

Questioning the viability of whether or not possible alternatives for God could somehow become available in Christianity relies, however, on whether or not churchgoers wish, or indeed value, the options Marcella considered to be so vital.[208]

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[206] This links into some feminist work by Athalya Brenner who, in referring to the Hebrew Bible in particular, underlines that there are really no "bi-gender God" possibilities to be found within the narratives against the "male single parent" God so evident within it (Brenner, 2003: 172). Gavin D'Costa has similarly explained that this is why, in his understanding, the (possibly feminine) Spirit is normally an "essentially passive" unsatisfactory object in which "she is made the conduit of the semiotic and almost narcissistic love between Father and Son" (D'Costa, 2000: 15).

[207] Marcella had often commented on the need for churchgoers' conscientization to the Church's "influential systems including liturgies, hymns and prayers" that are the kind of elements that, in themselves, challenge the kind of "invisibility" that "stops us from questioning" (2000a: 127).

[208] It was surprising to find so many churchgoers who seemed unhappy with issues of inclusive language, especially by comments from women: Cybil was "uncomfortable" about word-changes (B, 67: 922), while Agnes considered it "unnecessary" (B, 93: 479); Emma felt that it appeared "pedantic" at times, since "the masculine is kind of accepted shorthand for masculine or female" and given that "everyone understands the term, why change it?" (C, 55-56: 376-378); Portia, expanded during their focus group discussion on Howard's preceding comment that "the male embraces the female", said that "Mankind is what you would interpret it as. It was obvious what was meant, you didn't have to spell it out as men and women or male

Appearing to be working on different agendas, they appear to connect to these issues at clear points of tension. For instance, the following passage of Marcella's, in which God and the Bible are understood to be radically different to those related comments already disclosed by churchgoers, highlights this situation well. If "reading Christ in the scriptures cannot be an exemplary but a revelatory reading," she said, the Indecent Theology of her position is one that:

> … unmasks that of God in Christ's own intimate chaos of love, messianic public expectations and contra/indications, that is, the voices of subversion in an otherwise well-tamed text. Reading Christ should not become a conclusive task. Revelation is not compatible with the closure produced by authoritative (and authoritarian) readings of the scripture. What we are looking for is a permanent displacement of references, a quicksand scenario as the alternative to a reading of the difference of God in Jesus, beyond the ideological configuration of heterosexuality (2006a: 519).

Yet, as already discussed in the elements reached through this thesis so far, is not such a "quicksand scenario" the last thing that churchgoers might want to find?

Nonetheless convinced that vital changes are needed (and even at latent levels) by those rejecting the call on the way to better options, the lack of realisation not just to the problem itself but to what might be already available to people is what troubled Marcella the most. It, in fact, became central to her indecent vocation; and, so, if, as she once suggested, "the exemplary role of the Bible … has created a prescriptive Christology of a closed order" (1995: 155), then revising biblical-God possibilities need to begin with the 'exemplary role' part rather than 'the Bible' *per se*.

Never wishing to discard the Bible entirely, Marcella instead used it radically differently in attempting to create per/versionary tactics of "permutative praxis" (2006e: 133). By calling it a "Queer Bible" (2003a: 78), she addressed its capacity of opening up

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and female" (B, 58: 615-620); and Margaret revealed that "the male language doesn't particularly bother me" (C, 16: 482-483), as did Arabella, Janet, and Cybil in their focus group discussion (B, 65-66: 862-877). Perhaps even stronger than the above examples from interviewees and focus group participants, Question 11 of the questionnaire study (a tick-box option on the topic of exclusive language) also revealed similar responses suggesting that many (including both women and men, and those younger and older) appear to be unbothered by the issue. Of the 547 churchgoers who completed Qn11, about half (270) indicated 'No, not at all' and just a small minority of 18 said 'Yes, very much' at the other side of the spectrum (App. D, Qn11). In themselves, such responses underline the tension between churchgoers and Marcella on the same issue. Like Feminist Theology itself, now in its third (if not fourth) incarnation, Marcella referred to her reminiscence of an inefficient old-style 'inclusivity'-led feminist version – *i.e.* one that "struggled for a God who could be called 'Mother' at times and for hymns in which the word sister appeared alongside the word brother …" and so on (2005d: 266) – as one she was convinced women had moved away from long ago.

its endless potential to and for people and God: "hesitant, tentative, deeply contextual while sexually suspicious of any notion of stability, the Queer Bible may be read as an incomplete story, partially and momentarily filled with our own stories" (2003a: 78-79). Pragmatically fragmentary and somewhat fragile, the Queer Bible is then, in all its incomplete complexities, open to the adventure of anything that might happen *because* it necessarily uses people-first techniques via "the potential of dissident, marginalized epistemologies in thinking about God" (2005d: 271).

It is from such a strange reading of the place of the Bible that allows Marcella's stranger-God (2005b: 267) – a Queer God asking the important questions whilst "closeted, hidden and waiting … [in] the hope of liberating God from dynamic representations" (2002a: 30) – to be thrown in positive disarray by twisting radical options during the re-writing of "alternative imaginaries" (2001a: 243). Moving towards wild and unruly God-versions, it is from such disruptive indecency found within "the in-betweenness of these ruptures that the possibility of rediscovering the presence of a queer, different God amongst us emerges" (2008a: 11).

But if the emergence of such a revised God is to occur through Christianity's 'in-betweenness' as Marcella hoped – one where "God imagines new traditions all the time" (2000a: 67-8) and "dogmas are dead master narratives, and people's popular theology discards them and modifies them according to time and social problematic" (2000a: 84)[209] – it must first encounter "the ceiling of decency" (2000a: 167) in such doctrines as a springboard point of revisionary tactics. If, as Marcella alleged, "churches need theologies and theology needs the churches" (1998c: 12) and believed that "to stop the vicious circle will simply require another formulation, that is, the churches need to be people-centred (and not vice-versa)" (1998c: 12), then perhaps those people-centred churchgoers already finding value within the Christian system might find those doctrines and dogmas Marcella so maligns to be, by them, deeply held.

In mapping the tensions between churchgoers and Marcella further, some issues focusing on gender and sexuality are given a little prominence in *Challenging Contexts for*

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209 As early as one of her first published articles, in which she suggested that "the churches have many times been nearer to ideological production rather than allowing a community to work on its own process of understanding" (1993: 31-32), Marcella always forcefully considered the need of doctrines and dogmas to be challenged and revised. As "sinister ideological mechanisms" (2000b: 64) she felt that "Christian doctrines have been made to behave as if there are no trade unions to protect us from abusive interpretations and to allow people to join collectively in the production and distribution of their goods" (2000b: 68).

the Biblical God in Part Two, a concluding chapter that refocuses, in a limited way, on the revealing possibilities of all enquiring questions already found in each of the chapters. Before reaching this, however, chapter 3.3 concludes by invoking Derrida's thoughts in relation to the identity issues already found within this one.

3.3
Heterosexual Masculinities in Identity Closets

[Deconstruction] touches on everything,
it dislocates the self-identity
of an 'is' and an 'and' …
Jacques Derrida (in Royle, 2000: 297)

Typically referenced in minimal ways through cross-references and footnotes, but skulking in more than just a select few books and essays with at least some oblique connection to Jacques Derrida, the figure of Harry Block can often be found. Block is a fictitious man whose identity originates with the noted clever imagination of Woody Allen and his 1997 comedy screenplay, *Deconstructing Harry*. Through this film, Allen is credited with popularizing deconstruction, noted for subtly bringing all things Derridean onto the big (and small) screen, and for most insidiously introducing the name of Derrida in a domain outside philosophy.[210]

It is a story about identity issues primarily, accompanied with analytical twists through existential tones and a light parody of a selection of deconstruction's ideas and themes. But it is not deconstruction. Harry Block is not Jacques Derrida. And Derrida himself "confessed to disliking" the film ("The Economist", 2004, October 21). I am nonetheless starting with these questions of the identity of Harry Block to illustrate the contrary contingency of identities, and to question the gaps deconstructive thought brings to the themes of this chapter – which, as already illustrated through the tensions developed between Marcella and churchgoers above, zones in on particular issues relating to the changeable identity politics of God possibilities.

It was the identity of another Jacques entirely that, on October 8th 2004, announced the death of Jacques Derrida in Paris. In his public media statement, French President Chirac noted that Derrida "gave the world one of the major figures of the intellectual life of our times" (as cited in "The Economist", 2004, Oct 21). Beneath those words issued by Chirac on that day, the identity that was 'Derrida' was silenced by the ending of his voice. Yet Derrida persists still, and always differently. His identity

[210] Further information about the content of this film written and directed by Woody Allen in 1997 may be accessed, amidst others, at the Internet Media Database and Wikipedia; *cf.* "Deconstructing Harry (1997) – IMDb" and "Deconstructing Harry" (1997) in the bibliography.

endures in another form, as a 'Derrida' not quite *the* 'Derrida' who died but as another Derrida (named in the writing of this sentence for instance), one that lives by living on.

Identities continue, and always differently, whether they are Derrida's, Marcella's, or, as if strangely uncoiled from a fixed anchor in this particular thesis by both of them together, the potential possibilities given to that of God. Soon after he died, Judith Butler powerfully conveyed a sense of this in relation to Derrida and his continuing, yet different, identity:

> The act of mourning this becomes a continued way of 'speaking to' the other who is gone, even though the other is gone. We now must say 'Jacques' to name the one we have lost, and in that sense 'Jacques Derrida' becomes the name of our loss. Yet we must continue to say his name, not only to mark his passing, but because he is the one we continue to address in what we write; because it is, for many of us, impossible to write, without relying on him, without thinking with and through him. 'Jacques Derrida', then, as the name for the future of what we write (Butler, 2004: 32).[211]

In a sense, then, Jacques Derrida and Marcella Althaus-Reid are the names "for the future of what we write" – but, of course, it's neither Derrida nor Marcella nor indeed questions of their continued individual identities that are central to this investigation. Rather, in play is the potential of God's identity as it may possibly be understood in the Church where this invokes questions about 'God' and the name of God-potential through the ideas of possibilities and risks associated to alternative readings of divine identity politics.

If, in Derrida's thinking, there is no place beyond language, and, correlatively, no "meta-linguistic substance or identity, [nor] some pure cogito of self-presence" either (cited in Kearney, 1994: 125), then, in deconstruction, no destruction nor annihilation of identities is conceivably possible. As such, the means to "destroy" any identity is also the very thing that permits vital chances to "resituate" it (cited in Kearney, 1994: 125) – and, if also inclusively extended to God's identity too, this is then a premise that echoes strangely similarly to the present search of the 'impossibly indecent God' of the thesis title. What then seems critical is not what energises (more conventional) queries of 'who

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[211] Slightly different in focus than the above excerpt by Judith Butler, Peggy Kamuf wrote similarly about how Derrida might be understood posthumously: "For if I follow him here, if I am a follower of Derrida," she said, "that is because he is still teaching me everything needed to confront the experience into which we are plunged following his death. Jacques Derrida *was* and *is* my teacher, and I am still learning everyday from what he wrote and which he wrote and what he writes" (Kamuf, 2005: 5).

God is' particularly but, rather, the ideas surrounding focused imagination within the risky places surrounding questions of what God's alternative identity might bring.

In a discussion in which he answered his understanding on this subject in particular, Derrida draws upon ideas of the different conceptual gaps between 'God' and 'the impossible' imbricated in his thinking and, through this dialogue, he thereby marked a very important point that is now germane to be discussed here. "If I had to react quickly, I would say," Derrida explained:

> … that the difference between the passion for *the* impossible on the one hand, and the passion for 'God' on the other, is the *name*. '*The* impossible' is not a name, it is not a proper name, it is not some*one*. 'God' … is someone with a name, even if it is a nameless name like the Jewish God. It is a nameable nameless name, whereas *the* impossible is a non-name, a common name, a non-proper name. 'God' is a proper nameable nameless name. '*The* impossible' is a common non-proper name, or nameless common name (Derrida in Dooley, 2003: 28).[212]

So, as the ideas behind the excerpt suggest, if in Derrida's thought 'God' is clearly and forever demarcated from 'the impossible' on account of being termed on entirely different – if not opposite – appellative nomenclatures (titles themselves marking the fission found between the gap of name and no-name), then the capacity for different divine identities *through* and not instead of impossibility definitely remains available.

This means that the name for (even a nameless name for) God is known not by simply masking it as an alternative reading of '*the* impossible' itself (which Derrida clearly considers impossible *per se* anyway) but by instead placing value in the enabling possibilities thus arrived at. Acting as that non-name, impossibility then troubles theology's God-with-a-name by emptying the fixity of its tidy cupboard (that is naturally systematically labelled and ordered by neat predetermined categories) and offering new alternatives as a result. Thrashed against the contingent pretext of conventional Christian identity, 'God' *through* (and not instead of) *the* impossible is no longer "the omnipotent first cause, the prime mover, absolute being, or absolute presence" (Derrida in Caputo, Hart and Sherwood, 2005: 37), because the name of God itself demands the

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[212] While there is clarity in Derrida's placing of 'God' and 'the impossible' differently, the linkage between God and justice seems more ambiguous in John Caputo's reading of Derrida's thoughts on these words: "Is justice another name for God or is God another name for justice?" (Caputo 1997a: 68), Caputo enquires, further reasoning that "when the prophets, for example, use the name of God, they – like Derrida – seem to mean 'justice'; and when they speak of justice, they seem to mean God" (Caputo, 1997a: 68).

(impossible) tracing of a God-identity to be found through gaps that ably unlock visionary places of fluid and open questions.

If, in further elaborating Derrida's thinking on this topic, "identity is never given, received or attained [because] only the interminable, indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures" (Derrida, 1998: 28) this also means that "there *is* no identity; there is only identification or self-identification *as a process*" (Derrida, 2003b: 25). Deconstructing the identity process of Christianity's God-with-a-name might then involve revealing that whenever "there *is* stabilization of identity" this identification (of divine ontology) itself "confirms that there can be a break, there can be pathology, there can be ruptures … [and that] it is *because* the break is always possible that we need and perform identification" (Derrida, 2003b: 25).

Whether conceptually the ideas might be called 'breaks' – or gaps, traces and spaces as mentioned earlier – these are enabling words in Derrida's deconstructive thinking. But identification-as-process was still a continually ambiguous and thoroughly troubling position for him, and it is also a premise that is found to be strangely present in Indecency Theology through Marcella's God-ruptures found in unsettling nomadic places. Full of loose questions, identity-politics for Derrida, and also Marcella, seem to emerge forever in flux and riddled with endless breaking points from which "no one name … can assume the role of a Master Name that arrests the play and gives us all a good night's sleep" (Caputo, 2003: 46). In the challenging complexity of God potentialities found in both, such contingencies are already evident in this thesis by asking 'who is God?' and 'can God forgive?' type-questions in the preceding chapter conclusions; 'is God's identity identifiable?' seems to be another query similarly fitting for the present one.

Unlike Marcella's (radical) revisionary approach which invariably assumed a Christian perspective in religious traditions and institutional churches, Derrida's words are structured concepts that are far more located by abstraction. At several places in his discussions, Derrida repeatedly issued a disparaging critique of "concrete messianisms" – a considered phrase by which he proposed that religions were laden with the problem of trying to "calculate the unknown and the future" (Hart, 2004: 59). Finding hope, instead, in the notion of "religion without religion," Derrida (as paraphrased by Kevin Hart) allowed possibilities for:

> … a radical openness to the future, [and] an endless calling for justice. It would figure faith as the credence we extend to the other person, and the holy as the singularity of the other person. This is indeed religion without *religion*, without priests and liturgies, without dogmas and superstitions (Hart, 2004b: 61).

While understanding Derrida's outright rejection of all the trappings of religion, his alternative 'religion without religion' might, also, appear to discard any place for God entirely; yet Hart keenly underlines the complexity of Derrida's thoughts without leaving panic. "It might also be argued that [religion without religion] is also a religion without *God*, that it merely reworks a classical idea of virtue without religion," Hart begins, before explaining that as an assumption "this is not quite fair" (Hart, 2004b: 61). He continues by saying that this works because:

> … Derrida maintains that the other person is other in every way. If we agree with this anthropology, and figure the other person as addressing me from on high, then it is impossible to say whether my relations with him or her are ethical or religious (Hart, 2004b: 61).

In other words, the room for God is one that is found in this otherness (of every possible other) who is necessarily "other in every way" – and, in Hart's premise. Not oppositional but imagination-driven, "in Derrida's world there may be a God, and this God may be full self-presence, or may be otherwise than presence [and] these are open questions for him" (Hart, 2000: 290).

While Marcella, unlike Derrida, found herself involved in finding potentials for God (and ones brought that were less fixed, and more eminently revisable theological options), Derrida's naming of "the messianic structure" still meets Marcella's indecency juncture at a point closer than first thought. Neither anticipated nor prepared, Derrida's promise of the messianic structure leads to "the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice" (Derrida, 1997: 23) where the sense of justice he invokes is in the same vein as other concepts already mentioned such as hospitality,[213] and impossible itself.[214] Derrida's is an

[213] In deconstruction, all ideas of true hospitality also exists at extreme positions to its conventionally understood options: "If I am unconditionally hospitable I should welcome the visitation, not the invited guest, but the visitor. I must be unprepared, or prepared to be unprepared, for the unexpected arrival of *any* other. Is this possible?" (Derrida in Deutscher, 2005: 65-66).

anti-theology but one that is still so full of theology's possibilities in many critical ways. Furthermore, like the necessity of religion without religion in his thinking, "once the messianic is given determinate context," in deconstructive reading as John Caputo has said:

> … it is restricted within a determinable and determining horizon, but the very idea of the messianic, or messianicity, is to shatter horizons, to let the promise of something *tout autre* shock the horizon of the same and the foreseeable (Caputo, 1997a: 118).

Messianic ideas function as the means to radically open up anything that might yet happen, and thereby proposing issues to think with about available God-possibilities.

Linking into another concept of Derrida's, the supplement – in which there "is neither plenitude nor deficiency" (Deutscher, 2005: 38), neither missing lacking nor extra enhancing – is energising from within an endlessly disseminary play "as an aggressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity or security" (Derrida in Deutscher, 2005: 40). So seemingly innocent and straightforward but not really either term at all, the supplement picks up a vital task of endlessly opening up that which is neither truly surplus nor substitute in a positive light by being "assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (Derrida, 1976: 145).[215] For such a seeming unsurprising and very programmatic term, the supplement Derrida has conveyed carries its own mysteriously ingenious beauty.

The supplement provides the tactical character for revising ideas of God-concepts because deconstructing 'God' necessarily involves recognising that neither surplus nor substitute nor any original ontology is any longer forever fixed in any identity defined. "No monological discourse," Derrida wrote, further explaining that he was referring to "non-sexual discourse" and choreographies could even attempt to "dominate with a single voice, a single tone, the space of this half-light" (Derrida, 1982: 75-76) in deconstruction because such identity is continually mobile and changeable.

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[214] Of course, John Caputo's maxim – "Would we have any idea of the 'messianic' without the concrete messianisms?" – is a notable one in considering these related ideas of Derrida's thoughts (Caputo, 1997a: 273).

[215] If, as Derrida has said, the supplement works by never truly adding on nor filling in the missing then "the metaphysical position is to treat the 'supplement' as unnecessary and inferior in relation to the 'origin' but the origin in pure being, truth, inwardness and so on is [because it is still entirely] dependent on non-being, deception, the external and so on" (Derrida, 2004b:149).

Continuing with this premise, Derrida wrote further of "dreaming of the innumerable" (1982: 76) that is to be found:

> … beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond bi-sexuality as well, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. … I would like to believe in the masses, the indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual' (Derrida, 1982: 76).

Explaining the meaning of this further, Caputo conveys how "in Derrida's view, 'male' and 'female' are fixed containers, prisons, trapping men no less than women within one place, one role, closing off the possibility of 'innumerable' genders, not just two" (Caputo, 1997b: 104-5). These are the "innumerable nuances of gender" (Caputo, 2004: 120) that, in coming from a heavily positive laden deconstructive position of Derrida's thinking, in themselves "[refuse] to let sexuality or gender, or anything else – masculine or feminine, or both, or neither, or both and neither – contract into an identity and settle into a proper place" (Caputo, 1996c: 155). It is a freeing position. Furthermore, 'innumerable' genders trace the possibilities of a place where God-concepts could be opened up quite radically by plural multiplications, and to the awakenings of entirely non-fixed positionalities for Christianity's divinity in the process.

"Does the dream itself not prove," Derrida asked in 'Choreographies', "that what is dreamt of must be there in order for it to provide the dream?" (1982: 76). With possibilities already pre-empting the dreaming, such ideas full of life and deep playfulness, have, in themselves, already been the questions before the narrative dreaming of all (im)possibilities. So, here, in concluding chapter 3, the dream of radical God identity, breaking out of alternatives is already in mind, "beyond the actual and the possible, beyond the horizon of possibility, beyond the scope of what we can sensibly imagine" (Caputo, 1997a: 334), and is perhaps thrown out of narrow constraints forever by releasing revisionary possibilities into wide open places yet unknown. Yet, the discussions have so far also enveloped the differently understood questions through the tensions between Marcella and churchgoers in relation to God-alternatives, and tensions themselves further twisted by Derrida's deconstruction ideas. In its final chapter, the same elements of queries from people-first theologies still remain, and are extended further in chapter 4's conclusion, by focusing on issues of death and life, memory and

promise, stories and sexualities, and in considering the imagination of potential possibilities that might be available to an impossibly indecent God.

PART TWO
Challenging Contexts for the Biblical God

The point is that I miss theology as 'God-Walk'
What is the language of the God-Walk?
The language of the old women waiting for their buses, for instance.
In which accent should we speak about God?
Marcella Althaus-Reid (1996b: 76)

I referred to life a moment ago, and I would refer to it again and again
Jacques Derrida (in 2005b: 49)

4

Storytelling Spaces: Treading upon the Church's God

The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia *from which one may invent the only possible invention, the impossible invention*

Jacques Derrida (1992: 41)

If the first Eve had a fetishist penchant for a serpent, the second went for unprotected sex with a God-Cloud. Sexual metaphors which determine the beginnings of religious symbolic constructions are like that, chaotic, unpredictable and immoral …

Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000a: 4)

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think … and perceive differently … is absolutely necessary

Michel Foucault (1987: 8)

I take memory seriously as a treasure to knowledge without letting it predetermine what to see and how to think

Mieke Bal (2008: 21)

Althaus-Reid's work responds to a starkly different Christianity

Mayra Rivera (2010: 88)

I don't want people to fall for the assumption that the Bible is a contemporary document that can be doctored to affirm the equal value of women in society or suggest that God is relaxed about same-sex love. I want to feel its cultural offensiveness as well as its tragic sublimity full in my face …

Richard Holloway (2005: 4)

In examining familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that out very language is twisted and best even as it guides us

Gayatri C. Spivak (in Derrida, 1976: *xii*)

4.1
Of Lightbulbs and Landmarks

What happens then if the theologian does not refuse to produce an unstable theology even if she is under the current threats of metaphysical and material (academic or Church based) electrocutions?
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2003a: 15)

Purchased for the nation after its initial installation at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Nathan Coley's Turner Prize shortlisted piece – *The Lamp of Sacrifice, 286 Places of Worship, Edinburgh, 2004* – is a visually impressive Lilliputian collection of brown cardboard religious buildings, "a miniature city of holy places" minus their customary "windows, glass and little congregations" (Jeffrey, 2004, May 21; Cornwell, 2004, March 20). Randomly jumbled together in an anonymous 4ft-high higgledy-piggledy array, these 286 churches, mosques and meeting-places of cardboard constitution jostle for room as a "spiky mass" on the gallery floor in Coley's "reduced and reshuffled Lothians skyline of religious rooftops" (Fettes, 2004, May 24).[216] Himself an atheist (*cf.* McDermott, 2007, October 14; Gale, 2006, June 6), Coley is nonetheless very attracted to the role religion plays in making cultural statements and he "is fascinated by the idea of faith" (Campbell-Johnston, 2007, October 19). In *The Lamp of Sacrifice* in particular, he built from the symbolic architecture that faith buildings leave lying all around a map of their functional roles as "gathering places, landmarks, navigation aids" (Cornwell, 2004, March 20) in everyday secular life. In this respect, the contentlessness of their construction is critical.

Intrigued by this installation, I recently tried to visit *The Lamp of Sacrifice* but my forays to find it at Edinburgh's Dean Gallery (where it was last displayed) proved futile: Its light is currently under a bushel in the Scottish National Gallery's publicly inaccessible secure storage vault. There's an irony in the SNG's move to box up Coley's

[216] Coley's inclusion criteria for *The Lamp of Sacrifice* involved the generally ecumenical list of 'Places of Worship' mentioned in the local Lothians Yellow Pages telephone directory in 2004. In this, he followed a style developed in a previous installation in Birmingham along similar lines in 2000, this time involving 161 places of worship (all 161 of which were eventually shredded and pulped). The individual models forming Edinburgh's *Lamp of Sacrifice* installation took several months to complete "from corrugated card at a scale of one to fifty" (Gale, 2004, June 6), carrying no labels, nor tags of geographical or religious affiliations.

places of worship, wrapping each cardboard construction individually for protection whilst effectively abandoning the installation's ideological meanings to gather dust.[217]

This irony is extended further by means of an acknowledgement of Coley's stated agenda that *The Lamp of Sacrifice* offers an evaluation of "how buildings reflect and, to some extent, determine the values of a society" (Chapman, 2004, June 12), for the SNG storage analogy (as an extension of Coley's original intention) could be said to enact a cultural symptom of the Church's worth: If these places of worship are "architectural illustrations of what people believe in" in Coley's mind (cited in Cornwell, 2004, March 20), then shuffling all 286 of them, decanted now from view into a publicly inaccessible storage vault could offer a semiotic metaphor for the values of faith and belief in a secular Scottish society. As Iain Gale, writing about *The Lamp of Sacrifice* during its open-to-the-public stage, has astutely noted, there is a:

> … sense of vulnerability in Coley's shrunken churches. Defensive, impenetrable, they cluster together for security … While, as towering buildings, churches even today have an intrinsic power, this exists because of their architecture rather than in the meaning they might convey to us (Gale, 2004).

Coley has already ably illustrated the meaninglessness of their shell-like content, but the SNG has further emptied the architectural value as externally symbolic signposts as well. No longer is there any point in clambering inside the churches (Coley) even if there was anything left to see (SNG).

In a more recent installation that has been fixed onto a large steel scaffolding structure in the resplendent front gardens of the Dean Gallery in Edinburgh, Coley has constructed a neon-white illuminated sign made up of big plastic light-bulbs: *There Will Be No Miracles Here,* his austere and directive text reads in a glaring yet subtle glow.[218] It offers at once a simple aesthetic of programmatic understatement while still containing a

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217 Admittedly, this was probably a pragmatic move – 286 places of worship could cause some space issues.

218 Coley's piece was commissioned to be part of the *What You See Is Where You're At* exhibition during 2009 at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art/Dean Gallery in Edinburgh. As Coley himself has explained, the words on his installation do not originate with him: *There Will Be No Miracles Here* is in fact "a reference to a 17th-century edict sent to a village in Haute-Savoie by the King of France ordering that miracles should cease forthwith, following a disruptive outbreak of the pesky things" (Searle, 2007, October 22). In the French town of Modeseine, which was considered a site of miracles and magic in the 17th century, the original public decree was issued with an addendum: *There Will Be No Miracles Here – By Order of the King.* Another version of Coley's *There Will Be No Miracles Here* installation was shown at Mount Stuart House on the Isle of Bute.

strong injunction to follow the fearful admonition of its decisive message. "Being an atheist," he has said in an interview in *The Herald* in relation to the piece, "I think of it as a very positive message – honestly, I really do – but I'm very conscious that other people will think of it as very pessimistic" (Jeffrey, 2006, May 5).

Does Coley attach this potential pessimism he suggests his work evokes for some to the faiths he himself doesn't adhere to? Possibly. If he does, the lines drawn between a non-religious optimism (in the senseless impossibilities of miracles) and a faith-filled pessimism (in the texts firm injunction that *There Will Be No Miracles Here*) offer a simple bifurcation between atheistic optimism and pessimistic theism that is unworthy of its textual ambiguities. On the contrary, is this not a text which lives far from the straightforward force of magnetic repulsion between atheism and faith and instead amidst a swathe of ambiguities?

The text itself screams ambiguity from its glowing light-bulbs, and it does so in two ways. Firstly, any text issuing an injunction that *There Will Be No Miracles Here* is implicitly recognising that miracles are possibilities or else the need for additional signage is a superfluous step in the process. In other words, contained within the text is the very threat that it denies; the text itself asserts that "miracles – proof of the existence of some supernatural or divine force – can and do happen" (Gale, 2006). And secondly, tying in with the idea of miracles as "proof of the existence of some supernatural or divine force," the lack of miracle could – *even from a faith perspective* – be quite prophetic. This is because Christianity has the capacity for multiple readings, just like illuminated billboards and cardboard churches can be differently understood. Coley links magic and miracles to religious faith in order to read optimism from a position decrying their possibilities, undermining their worth; I, on the contrary, want to suggest that some forms of Christianity could also find a Coleyean optimism in not wishing to entertain miracles from within its own worldview. It may, for instance, find in Coley's message the means of rejecting the supernatural role of miracles via an interventionist God reigning tight and controlling, and replacing it with a more open justice driven ethics instead, if it wanted to. Questioning the variance in Christian possibilities vis-à-vis the limits of fixed theologies is something I will return to after another cultural analysis involving a few more light-bulbs.

Texts are potentially bound to different readings as a constitutional hazard, and, when read together, collaborative interpretative forces can venture all the more widely

to the possibilities of available intertexts. As someone who has been described as "one of Britain's most life-affirming artists, offering poetic moments of hope amid the grime of modern life" (Lack, 2006, October 7) Turner prize-winner Martin Creed is, like Coley, another installation artist with a penchant for illuminated text messages, using them, similarly, to make optimistic comments on the current state of affairs.

Leaving Coley's *There Will Be No Miracles Here* behind on the grassy banks of the Dean Gallery, finding Creed's installation involves only a short trip over a zebra crossing to the adjacent Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. This time the words are styled neon blue in a large textual arrangement that runs right across the front portico of the gallery facade, saying, very clearly, *Everything is Going to Be Alright*. There is a lucid immediacy about its gentle halcyon assurance that, almost without being summoned, lets us know that everything is indeed going to be just that. It is hopelessly inviting to the point of being intrusive, both striking and subtly enchanting while so reassuringly positive it is hard to deny it a smile. For those of a faith inclination, these bright blue lights could almost be an illuminated text message in halogen issued straight from God.[219]

Creed's minimalist work is well noted for its simple social ability "to create a community" through those viewing his (often humorous) installations (Jones, 1999, March 14).[220] Still on the light-bulb theme, his *Work 227: The lights going on and off* was – as described in *The Independent* – "just that – an entire white gallery at Tate Britain in London illuminated only by a handful of light bulbs flickering on and off" (Jury, 2001, December 10). And that is it. There is nothing more to the piece than a measured light switch in a white room made dark intermittently.[221] Its enigma lies in its sheer ordinary

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[219] It has been interesting to walk past *Everything Is Going To Be Alright* at different times of the day and seasons of the year, for it is far less effective in bright daylight but has a definite shrill impact glowing out in the dark. It is a daytime whisper but a late evening insistence that all is ok. More recently, however, as time has passed and the light-bulbs have become less vibrant, with some losing light altogether, *Everything Is Going To Be Alright* has become a faded message like an old shop sign at times, now issuing more of a shaky hope rather than a definitive assurance.

[220] Similar *Everything Is Going To Be Alright* installations have also been placed in venues in Milan, New York City, and attached onto the outer facade of the old London Orphan Asylum in Hackney (Searle, 1999, December 28). Public requests to retain the latter attached to the arches is Hackney meant that Creed's installation was allowed to outstay its original limited position on the basis that it was "a public artwork local people like" (Jones, 2000, March 19).

[221] Of course, art critics often wish to fill meanings in even where there are no obvious ones, applying them to such a seemingly banal piece, and so *Work 227* is sometimes understood as "a statement against clutter and consumerism" (Reynolds, 2001, December 10),

simplicity. Unlike Coley's questions over atheism/faith dualisms, Creed asks to tie things down more basically by skimming over the need for immediate analysis. It involves simple possibilities toggled between the plain slash between on/off and off/on. Creed is trying to make a community statement without asking to think too deeply about all the whats and whys.

Moving from this intertextual talk of illuminated signs back to Coley's empty cardboard installations and revising those "concentration camp of ecclesiastical miniatures" of Coley's as they have cleverly been called, Richard Holloway has pondered that, for him, *The Lamp of Sacrifice*, has:

> … prompted me to meditate on the danger of absolute ideas, whether religious or political. The proliferation of spires have historically symbolised pointing ourselves towards heaven but they also claim a certainty about God; big, dominating, dwarfing architecture can point towards an absolute religious system, political or religious brutalism, and persecution of those who disagree with us (Holloway, as cited in Mansfield, 2004, June 19).

These ideas of "the danger of absolute ideas" and "a certainty about God" that Holloway fears are critical elements of the concluding sections of the final chapter, which is one that culminates by drawing out the tension between possibilities considered through Indecent Theology's revisionary-laden potential for systematic religious demolition of ecclesiastical dogmatism and churchgoing Christianity's valuably conservative retention appeal. Asking much amidst the gaps found between both, it is with particular reference to stories of gender and sexuality that chapter 4.2 proceeds. Questions are posed in recognition that no attempt to reach the utopia of final conclusions are possible but that the ambiguities between both very different locales might be better understood. But before reaching the culminations of those, another focus on the imaginative potentials of Coley's installations strengthens such insights of this further still.

It is "a permanent work of art that deals with impermanence," announced Nathan Coley, whose new 2010 addition to *Jupiter Artland* – a sculpture park near Edinburgh – is an installation called *In Memory* which reproduces a small family graveyard (Coley, 2010, August 13).[222] It incorporates flowerbeds, paths, and a bench

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which is more a reference to the imagination of art critics than a direct reference to the piece itself, in my opinion.

[222] *Jupiter Artland* is located in 80 acres of private land around the 17th century Bonnington House, near Wilkieston, Edinburgh. It is the vision of owners Robert and Nicky

amidst 18 reused headstones that were "originally from burial plots but were later replaced or removed and lay disused" (Jeffrey, 2010, May 9).[223] The work's permanence alludes to its site-specific situation and to the conceptual nature of the piece: interred amidst some trees near the boundary wall of *Jupiter Artland,* it is violently enclosed in a high concrete container that is wrapped around the headstones, with only a narrow entrance allowing an uneasy way inside (Jeffrey, 2010, May 9).[224] Its impermanence is tied to Coley's sense of the piece's timeless qualities associated with memory, death and the passage of time. It is for this reason of impermanence that Coley came up with his "big conceptual move" (Coley, 2010, August 13) to individually remove the original names from the now anonymous and unspecified gravestones – gravestones which are, in turn, already destined to forever mark empty simulacra graves – that has worked so effectively.[225]

In order to tarry between the particular and general, the permanent and the impermanent, Coley is, through *In Memory*, using the familiar language apparatus of the fluid theme of memory to test points of transition between such things as holding on and letting go, life and death, then and now and no longer anymore. Describing the initial construction of the installation piece *in situ* near some trees at the boundary fence of *Jupiter Artland*, Coley has revealed, in an online interview with *The Tate,* how:

> … we spent a great deal of time and a great deal of care maintaining the dead tree, that real beautiful moment when the dead tree touches the top of the concrete; it's a really nice kind of, just kind of meeting of materiality, of something which was alive and is natural which is now dead and the concrete which was a kind of fluid mud thing (Coley, 2010, August 13).

There is a careful subtlety here, the effort placed into the noticed significance of preserving the precarious touch of organic and artificial, the spark that happens between

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Wilson to create a unique setting and sanctuary for innovative contemporary modern art, providing space for the work of notable installation artists in the UK (*i.e.* Anthony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, Nathan Coley, Shane Waltener, Patricia Cornel *etc.*). They open *Jupiter Artland* to the public during the summer months.

223 The headstones in Coley's *In Memory* installation "come from stonemasons in central Scotland and include two Jewish and one Muslim gravestone, reflecting the communities of Scotland that bury their dead" (Cornwell, 2010, March 31).

224 Never before has Coley constructed a permanent site-specific installation, and *In Memory* at *Jupiter Artland* marks his first. The concrete container which encases *In Memory* is carefully made in such a way that, as Coley has explained, "like the bands of the tree, each level is a period of time" (Jeffrey, 2010, May 9).

225 Providing further details of this move, Coley has shown how "the names have been removed out of sensitivity to the families – who were not contacted for permission – but the inscriptions and dates of death remain" (Cornwell, 2010, March 31).

a dead tree once alive and muddy concrete now forever solidified. It marks the permanence that makes all transitions fill with impermanence.

On viewing *In Memory* at the time, I first found the point at which the dead branch and concrete container merged into an uneasy collaboration unsettling: it seemed wrongly intrusive and out of place (a mistake, perhaps, or aesthetically suspect), as if a branch should have been sawn down long before the concrete set around the graveyard for good. On later analysis, however, it is now critical to my understanding of this piece, for to read the dualisms Coley gives to it (i.e. permanence/ impermanence, general/particular, life/death, mourning/remembering) also involves interpreting the untidiness of indefinites and shifting contents like dead branches and wet concrete. There is something lively about the dead, and a deadness about what's alive. This idea offers an introduction to the thematic shape of this chapter, a concluding one which asks some questions of any impossible possibilities for the biblical God in the Church through the thoughts of Marcella's, Derrida's, and churchgoers' ideas. But before getting there, another thematic illustration helpfully offers further insight into the important issues this final chapter contains.

As mentioned in relation to *In Memory*, Coley is interested in the presence of ambiguous spaces between and within dualisms. It has been said his work more generally is "very much about delineating space" (Jury, 2007, October 18). In his *Threshold Sculpture* – which consisted of "a hefty block of oak on the floor, running the width of the door" in *The Tate* in London (Higgins, 2007, October 19) – the same marks of ambiguities between and within dualisms persist. In *Threshold Structure*, the ambiguities turn on the axis of in/out, with the oak board placed at the entrance/exit point of the room, as a transition point but also a stumbling block. You are both in *or* out while simultaneously in *and* out of the room, and never really safe from this ambiguous plank of wood lying in a dangerous position under the doorway on the floor; so, in concluding this section, it might be said that, it is in such a questioning impasse as this one presents, that new gaps of opportunity surrounds us, in similar ways that dissemination disperses possibilities and generates future potential in our lives.

4.2
When Trespassing on Gender and Sexuality Collide

God's skirts are a suitable divine metaphor
for material girls in theology which
helps us to reflect on God
in our lives …
Marcella Althaus-Reid (2002a: 24)

Ever a storyteller theologian, and perhaps just as vividly strong as the art-world's affection for illuminated lightbulbs, it was "some years ago," Marcella began, that "I was walking with a group of women in a deprived area of Scotland … [on] one of those dark afternoons in winter when few people are in the streets of poor neighbourhoods" (2006g: 2). Reminiscent of her earlier work in Dundee as a Freirean community educator, Marcella continued to explain that:

> … the lack of facilities (except for a local pub, a bakery and a drugstore) contributed to a sense of insecurity for the few daring to go out. While we were walking, we were confronted by the aesthetic experience of many Scottish deprived areas, the billboards … [for] in a secular Britain, adverts occupy the central place in the lives of people (2006g: 2).

In this simple life-moment containing elements of both fear and promise, therein meshed together (fairly ubiquitously) through the ordinariness of advert hoardings for washing detergent, Marcella cleverly distilled – from the billboard's oblique symbolism – some critical questions.

These were not just those obvious ones concerning the everyday meaning that women have often been subjected to as apparently principle 'housekeeping' recipients of similarly obvious clothes-spin-cycle evangelism consumption for years, as the poster itself alleged. On the contrary, and clearly more importantly, Marcella's sharp questions were thrown out much wider by her intentions to "read the Bible outside the Bible" (2006g: 2; *cf.* 2.2.*iii*) and trade the washing-machine message for much more over-reaching global mechanisms; so, she did not immediately reach out for a certain brand of washing power at her nearest supermarket as (following the poster's injunction) she was meant to and might have, but, instead, used it to transgress the obvious and choosing to find critically valuable places in it related to Christianity and women, sin and purity, economics and politics, and Jesus and God. Like so many of her examples, Marcella's storytelling was multi-layered in vision, the kind that brought catalysts to

many of its points along the way. Regularly circulating such indecent-laden questions, she read the Bible outside the Bible in order to ask us to re-read (and be affected by) the Bible's content not just once but again and again.

Opening the first pages of the second chapter of her first major book *Indecent Theology*, Marcella began 'The indecent Virgin' interestingly by referring to a bold, bright painting of Yolanda Lopez's entitled *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* (2000: 47).[226] In her work, Lopez painted her self-portrait by placing herself dynamically assertive and openly self-assured in the Mary role as a determined contemporary woman "dressed with a modern skirt and trainers and in a jogging attitude" (2000: 47). In doing so in her portrayal of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Lopez upturned the conventional figure of Mary as a fixedly unmoveable, safely tame, pale and static figure, permanently passive and probably bored, with the kind of posed stature that fixed her invariably in a downcast demeanour distancing her from no-one and nothing in particular.[227] In many ways, Lopez's artistic creativity in revitalising Mary's conventional artefact plasticity is an indecent one on par with Marcella's similar kind of radical theological vision.

Women's clothing was always important to Marcella. Being so strongly symbolic of the things deeply set in the fundamental elements of Indecent Theology, women's skirts were at the heart of important ideas surrounding questions of God and politics, people and sexuality as conveyed by Marcella through her theologizing "without using underwear" (2000a: 200).[228] If Lopez, in her painting, resisted and replaced the pale blue ankle length dress with a new short skirt in which to run from standardized Mariology far more freely, then, in dismantling Mary, Marcella also dared to investigate the gain in unveiling what is going on in more exciting places under the petticoat level. Marcella has said that when it comes to Mary's skirts, which is "not a biological point" as an explanatory aside, "women theologians have been too fast to see in her what every woman wants in her as an individual and as part of a community" and yet, somewhat

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226 Especially popular in Mexico, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe' is an apparition of Mary that dates back to 1531.

227 There are, of course, variations in how a conventional 'Virgin Mary' might be understood, but elements extending beyond LALT contextual alternations are not effective in Marcella's thinking, since "the image of a peasant Mary is still one of a clean-faced smiling child-mother simply dressed, and perhaps with a scarf on her head" (2000a: 75; *cf.* 2008c: 72).

228 Marcella's original use of 'without underwear' as a conceptual idiom is present in several of her articles (for instance, 1999: 43; 2002a: 27); and, furthermore, in one of her earliest essays, it perhaps existed at a nascent level with notions of women who "tucked up their skirts" (1994: 63) to fight against injustice.

frustrated by women's risk and vision, when it comes to the madness surrounding Mary, "nobody has taken the trouble to lift up her skirts" (2000a: 61) nor dared to peek and forage for a better version.[229]

Marcella's disappointment is linked not to naïve ideas that women are genuinely unaware of the problems with Systematic Theology's unmoveable Mary-version, but rather that so many do so little about dismantling it through some critical exercising of alterations.[230] There are options available, yet rarely used. In understanding this further, Marcella wrote anecdotally about a remembered situation in which:

> … a group of poor Latin American women were doing theology, discussing the role of the Virgin Mary in their lives. Asking themselves if they identified with the Virgin Mary in their sufferings, one of them, looking at the Virgin's statue, said, 'No, because she has expensive clothes and jewels, she is white and she does not walk' (1994: 55).[231]

Yet, even as a problematic (and in this case colonial-filled) 'Mary' just like this one rejected amongst these particular Argentinian women many years ago, it still stands strong and unmoved as standardized Mariology and nonetheless "plays a very important role in their lives" (1994: 55) – *i.e.* as a Mary that pre-exists the chance of better options for revisionary tactics to happen.[232]

Aware of this, Marcella's Mariology is full of similarly controversial elements of the madness that makes "this 'thing' called the Virgin Mary" (2000a: 39) act as a "patriarchal gender performance going solo" (2000a: 71); and it is one so dreadfully funny while still seriously harmful because it involves 'Mary' – "a woman who is not a woman" (2000a: 54) – that affects women in such hidden places so badly. Mary arrives

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229 For instance, Marcella detailed "the richness of all sort of theological reflections" of a crucified woman as an example, but she underlined that "we have still not reached under her skirts" through such symbolic imagery, because liberation must necessarily exceed such "destabilising theological high truths which are mere gender illusions" (2002a: 30).

230 Confident that her underwear symbolic need not be linked to Mariological issues alone, Marcella further explained that others (i.e. God, Jesus, Prophets and Apostles) can also join Mary in the party since "they all live in our religious imagination and their biographies can be changed, opened or closed down" (2000a: 62). The greatest strength of her biting critique of Mary are criticisms emboldened by her fearless commentating: "a poor peasant woman, with courage and inspiration and a list of relevant virtues for the modern, peasant woman full of courage," she implored, "Really?" (2000a: 64).

231 Details of this particular event was derived "from a popular Bible study group gathered in a parish in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1987" (1994: 55).

232 Although these issues of Mariology are particularly Latin American in her work – a context in which she believed "the whole social structure of patriarchalism rests upon the pillars of Mariology" (1994: 56) – Marcella remained convinced that it still affected women from different socio-economic/religious backgrounds more globally.

as a simulacra hand-out through years of associations with the legendary Mariological scene as a "quasi-woman" (2000a: 23) who is "sexually stagnant" (2000a: 72) yet, strangely enough, "made into a sexual code" (2000a: 53), even though she is really just:

> Mary, the icon of a no-body. To start with Mary is to start with an idea, a gas-like substance, a myth of a woman without a vagina which discloses in a hilarious way the fact that half of humanity has been constructed around ideas of ghostly simulacras. As a woman theologian myself, I need to struggle against the idea that using 'she' for the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary is not a woman but a simulacra … For me, if the Virgin Mary had paws instead of hands and her vagina was in her ear, thus making it easier for the Word of God, the Logos, to 'say its Word' and penetrate her, it would not make any theological difference. Mary is in the realms of the fantastic and phantasmagorical (2000a: 39).

As such, she is the most perfect of all examples available to experiment with, a 'Mary' that by utilising all the newly imaginative possibilities of potential rewriting "without underwear" by lifting up her (incredibly indecent) skirts.

In regularly bringing ideas of people and their ordinary situations into her writing, "real, conscious, aware women in Christianity, silenced and denied for centuries" are those that Marcella believed could act as "living graffiti" just by their existence – people who, in shouting loudly, could announce "'we exist', 'we are real'" (2000a: 100). Enduring difficulties of a position such as Marcella's, however, is one that invariably comes from a particular type of academically-led theological situation, and one complete with its own maelstrom of (both latent and overt) expectations and assumptions. So, while her perspective allowed her to announce that "women have left the Church in droves" (2000c: 34) when, in fact, this might not be the case entirely,[233] Marcella's sense of "real, conscious, aware women" must also match Edinburgh churchgoers – just like Lily or Ruby – who might indeed be one, like Marcella imagines, who "suddenly finds that the sexist language does not make sense anymore, or that the biblical stories, read from the pulpit, do not relate to her life as a woman as they used to do" (2001c: 57), but, equally importantly, they also might *not* react to Marcella's

[233] In relation to understanding such tensions sensed between Marcella and churchgoers, perhaps this can be found on the topic of inclusive language in particular: Considering it to be old-fashioned and passé (2007a: 290), Marcella necessarily progressed from it to her understanding of more fruitful issues, such as those questions addressing the "poverty of divine gender representation" (2000d: 54) as an example, or underlining that "women are the flat characters of theology … [left] floating in the texts" (2000a: 101); churchgoers, on the other hand, seem not to consider inclusive language archaic but instead place its obsolescence convincingly in the realms of unimportance misdirection.

assumptions in this way at all; and therein lies the problem central to this argument, complete with its contrary context and fraught tensions and the ambitious and difficulties this infers.

Interestingly, questions of safety and risk in the Church are on-going and important issues, and often they are also found alongside related ones like ideas and perspectives around change and modernisation. In 1984, the Church of Scotland produced a treatise entitled *The Motherhood of God*, and the debating upon which it was based related back to a prayer used by a commissioner (from The Guild in the General Assembly of 1982) in which God was referenced at a few places with feminine words, *i.e.* Mother and Woman (Lewis, 1984). Although she made no reference to this directly in our discussion, during my interview with Lily it became clear that she was thinking about it, initiating our dialogue on the issue as follows:

> I wasn't at it, but there was some kind of Guild meeting several years ago now. And one of those present at it said, prayed to God as 'she' at that meeting. And there was a bit of a stushie about it I think. That was … but that's this ultra-feminism sort of thing coming in
> (C, 176: 526-530).

Lily's use of her phrase – "this ultra-feminism sort of thing coming in" – sharply underlines the negativity she felt in her reaction to this evident 'stushie' caused by women, and not only this, but also how "ultra-feminism" is placed in her understanding as a churchgoing woman.

In another interview, Ruby likewise revealed to me her disparagement of feminists themselves – i.e. those women who, unlike her, "want to think that God's a woman" (C, 129: 345). Such feminist-like women are themselves the ones bringing irritating problems to women in the Church in Ruby's reading of the situation by de-valuing the credibility of a different perspective, such as Ruby's own.[234] "You don't <u>have</u> to be fighting all the time," Ruby exclaimed:

> … I think that's where the feminists go wrong, always fighting. They're always wanting the hymns changed so that they're non-gender specific, and you think, oh, you know, for crying out loud ... I find, I find, I find them, it's irrelevant and people that are like that almost laughable. Because I just think,

[234] In revealing why she feels so strongly about this issue, Ruby explained to me during our interview discussion that, firstly, "I don't have the same anti-male attitude that a lot of feminists have" (C, 130: 347-348), and, secondly, that "I have difficulty in understanding what their, to be honest, I suppose to put it rather, I suppose rather crudely, what their beef is" (C, 131: 416-417).

> you know, you're a joke, if that's really, if that troubles you, I feel for you. You've got, you know, what has life done to you that's made you feel so aggrieved by any sort of gender-specific language?
> (C, 131: 401-403, 407-410).[235]

These are strong words indeed against "the feminists" that are "so aggrieved" that they feel determined to shake the Church; and Ruby, in feeling they are mistaken, fears the consequences of their protest. But, just like Lily's comment above, for Ruby, too, such comments as this in coming *from* women illustrate the tension between the credible gap of Marcella's assumption about the place of some women that is already found to be in the churches.

Not only limited to excerpts from Ruby and Lily in the interviews however, Feminist questions also featured in some of the focus group discussions as well; and in one of them in particular, the issues centred on a debate about women ministers especially. "I don't have <u>any</u> issues with women elders, ministers, bishops," Paul declared very positively (and "just for the record"), further explaining that when it came to a biblical premise on this topic then "Paul probably got it a bit wrong" (B, 107: 977-979).[236] One of the main advantages of discussing issues during a focus group situation is that people offer alternative readings from their different positions. The discussion involving Paul's ideas about women ministers included different views from other churchgoers, such as Ryan – who announced that he didn't "personally believe in women's ministers" (B, 106: 937-938)[237] – and Sandy, like Alice who also similarly felt "undecided on the whole thing" (B, 106: 1002),[238] was simply "uncomfortable" about the idea, especially about the "wrong type of women" (B, 106: 941, 954).[239]

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235 What I find particularly interesting in Ruby's dismissive reading of the feminist goal is her alternative position on the rights and values of non-heterosexual churchgoers: "I sat through the Assembly when there was the debate about ministers blessing Civil Partnerships, and sat through that in horror realising that the people who were, to me, being the most unconstructive in their approach to the debate were probably the ones who had immersed themselves and taken a very literal view of the Bible" (C, 127: 260-264; *cf.* also C, 134-135: 519-525, 540-543).

236 In mentioning the appointment of a woman minister at her church in the past, I found Margaret's comment interesting in relation to it: "they've been around for a while – it wasn't as thought we were doing anything particularly iconoclastic or anything like that" (C, 9: 194-195, *cf.* C, 17: 492-497).

237 This is Ryan's position, even though there are "very godly women" that, he believes, still "try and serve God" (B, 106: 943).

238 Citing the difficulties of reconciling her current thoughts on the issue of women ministers, Alice approached it from her upbringing in another denomination in which women

Nonetheless, not only are such similar anti-feminist-type comments already comparable, in some ways, with those of Ruby and Lily mentioned in the interview excerpts above, but they are repeated again within the same focus group discussion itself. This time Agnes shared with others a conversation involving a minister who said that, on this issue, "it's not so much that I disapprove of women it's the, it's the kind of women that are coming forward" (B, 106: 946-947), which Agnes paraphrases as "strident, strident feminist types" (B, 106: 948). While feeling ambiguous about the topic of women in the Church herself, a bit like Sandy and Alice above, Agnes made it very clear nonetheless that issues related to sexuality are entirely different and fairly fixed: "I don't think there's <u>any</u> ambiguity at all on the sexuality," she affirmed (B, 108: 1011).

"Sexual and gender issues are not addenda in the minutes of a meeting," Marcella has suggested, "but key epistemological and organisational elements which, if ignored, never allow us to think further and differently" (2000a: 132); and it is in moving from questions of women and feminism to sexuality and stories that the rest of this chapter proceeds. "We do not need to speculate biblically on Mary's sexuality," Marcella noted by some indecent theology (naturally without underwear), but:

> … we must be ready to be that sort of reader who can understand texts sexually through our experiences: to name what is not nameable; that is, that Mary may have slept with women, with men but even more than that, that sex is a very narrow definition in heterosexuality and that it needs to be theologically revised, too (2000a: 77).

As such, it seems important that it is only in admitting and inviting stories into people's lives that theology might change and advance by opening itself up to alternative visions. Perhaps the difference is that churchgoers are very much living in a limbo position in an ambiguous place that is not too unlike Coley's Threshold Structure with its own virtual oak block lying questionably in a bit unnerving place on the floor.

"In reality," Marcella has said, "Queer people live lives which are as innocent, more or less, as any other person in this world, but by a process of heterosexual fencing and displacement they have been subjected to a high body theology of transgression,"

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could be neither elders nor ministers, and "your first glance of New Testament scriptures seems to back that up" (B, 108: 1006).

[239] Offering an alternative perspective than Paul's, Sandy, in his un-decidability about the issue of women ministers, still suggests that "and at the end of the day, I suppose, when you read Scripture, you read the Pauline letters, for example, he's pretty anti-women taking the lead, but then was that his tradition? Or are we meant to have it for all time?" (B, 105: 905-907).

(2003a: 169); and perhaps this has never been quite so apparent as in those issues surrounding the Church of Scotland's situation on sexuality.[240] More than anything in Marcella's thinking, questions of sexuality are critical to theology because "sexuality matters" (2007b: 32): it is so much more important that simply "who loves whom" (2007b: 33), and, as such, "does not stay at home, or in a friend's bedroom, but permeates our economic, political and societal life" (2000a: 131, *cf.* 2000d: 56; 1997: 49). "If we were to follow Karl Barth's suggestion of taking both the newspaper and the Bible into the pulpit," Marcella once suggested,

> … we should find it difficult to preach on anything except sexuality … We are continuously confronted … by the Church's obsessive preoccupation with sexuality, or to be more accurate, with its preoccupation with controlling sexuality (2007b: 30).[241]

It is then by something of a strange coincidence that Marcella's reference to Barth's newspaper-and-Bible combination is also found in the questionnaire research, although, even more interestingly, churchgoers' thoughts relating to it end up being radically different readings than Marcella's.

In the questionnaire study that churchgoers were involved in, a final concluding question focused on particular contemporary issues for the Church of Scotland. Question 13 (D, Qn13) was designed in two parts: firstly, it was arranged by tick-box options of which churchgoers were invited to choose one; and, secondly, by an open grey-box option giving churchgoers the chance to write their own thoughts relevant to the question in it (and, indeed, about anything else related to the entire questionnaire study itself). In the first tick-box section, churchgoers were asked to indicate, from four available options, which of the issues listed there they considered to be the most important in terms of what at the time the Church was facing. Arranged by the use of small snippets from topical newspaper excerpts, these were listed as follows:

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240 Furthermore, as Marcella pointed out, "perhaps Queer people receive a special sense of divine vocation or a wanderlust that makes of them un-institutionalised, restless nomads" (2003a: 49) in their persistent dismantling of heteronormativity (*cf.* 2002d: 92; 2008d: 109), and beginning that with the "heterosexual assumption" (2002a: 27) found within ecclesiological understandings.

241 It is because "every theological discourse is implicitly a sexual discourse, a decent one, an accepted one" (2000a: 22) that "Totalitarian Theology" (2003a: 8) (by which Marcella means "theology as ideology, that is, a totalitarian construction of what is considered 'The One and Only Theology' which does not admit discussion of challenges from different perspectives," 2003a: 172) fixes the limited options of sexual alternatives in Marcella's thinking.

A 'Sexuality Time-Bomb is Set to Explode Under the Kirk'

B 'I'll look at the idea of theology being presented with a Bible in one hand and a daily newspaper in the other'

C 'Dubbed 'CH4' by Kirk Officials, anger has been expressed by traditionalists at the absence of old favourites …'

D 'The appointment of the Rev. Sheilagh Kesting as Moderator … was being hailed as a 'statement of equality' by a leading religious commentator' (D, Qn13).[242]

Of these options, more churchgoers chose to tick 'B' than any other (*i.e.* 156 of the 337 who responded to this part of Qn13); so, issues related to this one (which I understand as the one that refers to the need that Christianity stays grounded in, and contextualised by, contemporary everyday issues) were by far the strongest, and occupied a place much ahead of option 'A' (which only accrued 53 ticks despite its overt reference to sexuality); it was the kind of scenario that – before analysing churchgoers' questionnaire responses – I assumed the 'A' option would be the leading choice trumping the rest, of those available by a significant majority.[243]

Remembering Marcella's earlier noted conviction that, "if we were to follow Karl Barth's suggestion of taking both the newspaper and the Bible into the pulpit … we should find it difficult to preach on anything except sexuality," this is a revealing connection – for it appears that churchgoers, in fact, seem less interested in thinking about sexuality-related issues in the Church than is commonly thought. This was further bolstered by the fact that so few (*i.e.* only 7 out of 306) churchgoers chose to write comments about sexuality in the open grey-box option available in the second part of the questionnaire; and, in a similar way, like the last, before analysis of the questionnaire responses I assumed sexuality-related comments would also be a popular choice amidst churchgoers' written comments, too (*cf.* D, Qn13).[244]

So, once again, it is intriguing to consider that "the Church's obsessive preoccupation with sexuality" of Marcella's comment overleaf in itself seems full of

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[242] Details of these particular excerpts used in the questionnaire, and further information that relates to Qn13, can be found in Appendix D (*cf.* D, Qn13).

[243] In preparing the questionnaire, my assumption was that churchgoers' would probably be less likely to choose option 'B' as it related to potentially contains politically-leading elements. In total, 337 respondents completed the first tick-box option of Qn13, and, apart from the 53 and 156 churchgoers who chose 'A' and 'B' respectively, 47 ticked 'C' and 81 opted for 'D' (*cf.* D, Qn13).

[244] Of the 306 respondents who offered written comments in Qn13, collectively almost a third referred to issues that related to: 1) evangelism, mission and outreach (51 respondents); and, 2) issues of declining attendance and demographics (45).

assumptions of its own when read against churchgoers' alternative thoughts about such comparable questions. This is not to say that people in the churches involved in the research study don't think about questions of sexuality much at all, for, on the contrary, this is clearly the case; however, my sense of understanding relevant issues through this particular practical research suggests that churchgoers feel much more ambiguous about, and find difficulties with, the topic than I expected. I think this is not because they don't think it is important but that they would rather place their focus elsewhere. So, not only do churchgoers seem to place sexuality-type issues low in their agenda, but some also appear to be fairly resistant to discussions around it as well.[245]

In a way that offers a more subtle means than questionnaires can convey, the interview and focus group research allowed churchgoers a better chance to discuss their ideas of hopes and fears for the Church of Scotland generally, while similarly linking their thoughts about issues related to sexuality. Through this, it became evident that churchgoers seemed concerned about particular things that they considered to be of significant importance – issues such as ensuring the Church produces a countercultural religious message, preserving the importance of giving values and meaning, credibility and relevance, proclaiming an evangelising message; or, alternatively, those issues they felt especially concerned about – things like Church survival and congregational decline, including their thoughts around any potential threat of schism sensed within the Church, together with issues highlighting the significance of safety, comfort, protection and belonging.[246]

I was particularly struck by this sense of fear and risk attached to safety and protection, comfort and belonging at various points in discussions with churchgoers, and most especially through the following focus group discussion involving Cybil, Portia

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[245] For instance, Angus has conveyed his struggle with sexuality-type issues that "grab the headlines" even though there are more important ones to consider (C, 75: 541-545). Margaret, likewise, said in relation to her ideas on such issues that "to single out one group like this is a slippery slope" (C, 17: 512-513), while Iris' self-declared awkwardness about the topic made her wish sexuality remained "a private matter" in the same way that it did in her younger days because "nowadays it's all in your face" (C, 116: 828-829). Sandy, on the other hand, considered that such issues centred on sexuality were themselves a "device of the devil" designed to side-track Christians from focusing on matters of importance (B, 111: 1117), while other churchgoers during the same focus group discussion asked questions of Church control – especially celibacy – in relation to issues of sexuality (Agnes, Alice, Paul, B, 109-110: 1044-1066).

[246] Excerpts of churchgoers' comments on these related issues are found through the following references *in passim*, for example: Lily (C, 177-179) Deirdre (C, 300-301) Iris (C, 116-118), Ruby (C, 132-136), Anita (C, 316-318), Frances (C, 154, 158), David (C, 41-42), Cathie (C, 281-282), John (C, 211, 216), Angus (C, 64, 76), Murdo (C, 85, 91), and Samuel (C, 259-261).

and Arabella. In alluding to some "really difficult" questions relating to her thoughts of "where the right road lies" concerning perceived dilemmas and discernments in churches (such as sexuality as an example), Cybil issued necessary caution in being "very careful … how far you go along that road, because suddenly you find you're left with … nothing at all" – an anxiously questionable "nothing at all" location that is filled with a real sense of loss associated with the perceived fear of what, might in the end happen. And then the discussion proceeds with Portia's question:

> **Portia**
> Where do you draw the line?
> **Arabella**
> And you can't go back.
> **Portia**
> And you can't go back.
> **Cybil**
> You can't go back
>
> (B, 64-65: 816-829).

Almost seeming tangible in itself, the emphatic 'you can't go back' repetition by Arabella, Portia and Cybil in succession strengthens their individual, and also collective, sense of fear around such a (yet unknown but still menacing) 'what might happen' scenario. It is cushioned in a 'you can't go back' definition that threatens, from an understandably known position, of what is valued and cherished most of all; and, as such, perhaps a certain God-identity version might also be considered one from which 'you draw the line' because if 'you can't go back' what then will happen?

Writing from an opposite position, however, Marcella, in her writing of searching "for theological interchanges of intimacy, sexual identities and politics in the dark alleys behind our churches; the search for God in dark alleys," arrives at a very different result in her question of similarly asking "… how far can we go?" (2003a: 34). More than a conservative risk-assessment in the churches, Marcella gauges precarious dares by endlessly taking the necessary plunge regardless of any consequent loss. The risk itself is too important to reject, because, for her, the alternative risk of limiting or rejecting options in God-thoughts are the most fearful loss of all; and this involves the "whole art" of continually taking chances to "betray systematic straight thinking about God, to betray the presupposition of a sacred given-ness in ecclesiology and the ideals of heterosexual ideology in society" (2006f: 147). Marcella believed in this necessity because people matter, and because God (even if caught up in a limited, fixed cycle)

matters too. More than fear of loss, Marcella was fearful of stifled, unimaginative options stuck forever in the status quo (looking much too scarily decent in itself); so Indecent Theology offers "high sexual revolt" (2002a: 27) as a much more vibrant option in return. "What is urgently required is not the improvement of a current theology through some addenda such as gender and sexual equality," Marcella has said, "but a theology with a serious Queer materialist revision of its methods and doctrines" (2003a: 148).

In a similar way that Marcella, in her writing, often began with an injection of as much possible positivity as she could muster, Emma – an interviewee in the research study – also had an openly engaging view of Church revisionary potential; but, unlike Marcella, who thinks that "the sexual epistemology of the church cannot cope with revolutionary understandings, only with revisions and adaptations" (2001a: 247), Emma begins with positing the Church as a place already considered quite radical. Happy with the role the Church of Scotland has played by promoting gender equality in accepting women as ministers some time before, and in doing so has "obviously been pretty far-sighted" (C, 58: 461-464), Emma felt sure that the Church would similarly become more open in its acceptance of "same-sex unions" relatively soon (C, 58: 465).[247] When I asked Emma whether she thought the Bible might have provided an obstacle in how she understood issues of sexuality in current controversies in the Church, she replied, saying:

> Not from what I've ever read of it, but I've never read it in that light, and I maybe haven't read the right passages, and, you know, if we've to love one another … then I think excluding people on the grounds of sexuality is therefore wrong. You know, it <u>is</u> meant to be an inclusive religion (C, 58: 470-474).

Nonetheless, as something considered to be an inclusive community, Emma's reading of the Church as positively-led and open is still buoyed by this sense that, in her words, "I maybe haven't read the right [biblical] passages," perhaps with the understated caveat that the less positive verses are those she is likely to still encounter.

The role of the Bible amidst several other churchgoers does, however, seem to have been a much more decisive one, especially regarding issues of sexuality. Ryan, for

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[247] Although positive about the Church and its potential to adapt, Emma clearly perceived the urgency of revising attitudes to homosexuality and same-sex unions: "Society has certainly embraced that," she underlined, "and I think the Church in not doing so is probably breaking the law actually!" (C, 58: 465-466).

instance, as focus group participants, and who, like Emma, also grew open in a social culture where issues on sexuality were more openly discussed, nonetheless "agrees that homosexuality is … against God's will … and that God … that people, the people who are in gay relationships can escape from their homosexual urges through faith in Christ" (B, 109: 1032-1034).[248] To refer to another example, it was during our interview discussion at a point mentioning issues of biblical interpretation and civil partnerships, that Lily said that there was "no way I could agree with it" on biblical grounds (C, 176: 546-547). Having earlier spoken about the issues during a Presbytery debate, she recounted it to me clearly with reference to the Bible: "I just pointed to the beginning – God made male and female and sort of emphasises that side of it – God doesn't change, sort of thing" (C, 177: 565, 576-577).

As already mentioned in earlier chapters, Lily, in the above comment, is alluding to the strong links already noted by churchgoers between God and the Bible in Christianity, and how they collectively impact in a decisively critical manner on people's everyday lives. "On the aspect of homosexuality," as Deirdre put it during our interview, the Bible is the directive force in her decision-making and the Bible is where God articulates thoughts to churchgoers: "God tells us in the Bible," she begins, that Christians should "love the person and not the sin, and <u>in doing that</u> we can accept the people and not what they do" (C, 300: 666-668), where a position of logic in accepting people involves a rejection of their perceived 'wrongdoing' on the grounds that "it's not scriptural, it's not what God intended man and woman to be, is it?" (C, 300: 673-675).[249] Such rhetoric provides an effective ethical solution for some churchgoers, as the similar points Cathie made during our interview discussion:

> I believe God loves all people. I believe there is types of life that he doesn't like, ways of living that he doesn't like. It doesn't mean that he doesn't love the people ... For me, in simple terms, I would say would I love someone who does not have the same kind of sexual orientation as me? Yes, because God loves them. I wouldn't persecute them or shun them or anything else. Do I believe the way, when they've got a partner, that way of life is a good thing?

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[248] I valued Ryan's honesty during our focus group discussion in describing his comments about homosexuality as "a very controversial attitude and not one that I would express outside the Church, especially to other people of my generation because I would be lynched" (B, 109: 1034-1036). There was a sense that members in this particular focus group were fairly similar in their thinking on this issue, and thereby allowing Ryan to speak safely.

[249] Like Deirdre above, the necessity to "take a stronger stance" (C, 300: 683-687) against perceived wrongdoing - regardless of the human implications - is shared by some others, too (*i.e.* Anita, C, 317: 498-507; Julie, C, 234: 613-614).

> … No, no. Do I think that the Church should bless marriages of the same gender? Well the Word would say that, you know - no, to that really (C, 280: 639-647).[250]

And, as such, Cathie's is again a similar position as Deirdre's in which God and the Bible are inextricably linked, and so enmeshed, that the options for revisionary tactics in churches and in Christianity are limited by the connective God-Bible command.

In concluding this section in which the issues are given a human face and made perceptible through the discussions so far, the tensions between Marcella and churchgoers seem to be at their strongest when the everyday lives of ordinary people are put in play, even if, theologically, quite differently understood by both. In Marcella's thinking, this could have involved attempts to "gather together all the dispersed fragments of love and sexual identity struggles in people's lives, and add to that the struggle for spaces of freedom and social justice which constitute the real Queer traditions of the church" (2003a: 8-9), by bringing situations to disruptive starting points from which the relentless challenging way-ahead really comes. Such difficulties have already been realised through the noted tensions that are found between Marcella's and churchgoers' alternative perspectives on the preceding chapters, and, also, in this final one, whereby the God-Bible connections had been working alternatively across this paradigm.

In this thesis overall, the disruption began quite implicitly at moments even earlier than the chapters themselves, for it was revealed through initial pages in the 'Introduction' section that helped it to stay alert to the strong importance of Marcella's 'Indecency' and Derrida's 'Impossibility' as key terms held therein. Through a querying outlook in particular, and in respect to the main title's question of 'An Impossibly Indecent God?' specifically, these elements of indecency and impossibility were noted – often obliquely – as every chapter proceeded by focusing on particular elements of

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[250] However, those considering homosexuality sinful are also aware of the human side of such sexual condemnation. Concerning a minister's sermon with a focus on homosexuality, Paul asks: "how does the person in church who is, say, homosexual, <u>feel</u> if the sermon or the focus is on that? Is that any greater sin than the person sitting next to him who's been doing something else?" (B, 110: 1094-1096), and this is backed up by Alice: "I think the church, traditionally, has come across as very dogmatic about <u>certain</u> sins … oh, we don't mind all those others" (B, 111: 1099-1101). Expressing her sensitivity to the difficult pastoral position of ministers in particular, Cathie said: "I praise God I'm not a minister and I don't have to make that decision, because when you're involved with people as individuals it's not just a Word then, you know, you're dealing with their love and they genuinely love each other" (C, 280: 647-650).

tensions central to the argument. Realised in innovative ways through inviting places of idea-filled enquiries, the chapters were mapped by staging an exploration of irruptive notions underpinning the different dynamics around the alternative ideas of churchgoers and Marcella across such gaps. Unlike more conventionally progressive constructions in academic research, this has incorporated implicit tensions that were used in a more flattened, rhythmical space of intuitive viewpoints; and, furthermore, such an outlook has helped to permit anything fixed in searching conclusions in return for those reasons found within Marcella's and churchgoers' ideas, alongside those from Derrida's and the media's dialogic elements, too.

To first sum-up the chapters themselves, it is worthwhile to continue journeying by recapping on such outlooks that relate to some parts of each chapter's contrary positions. 'Impossibly Indecent Enquiries: God, Gender and Justice' was the title of chapter 1, and it is one that was strongly enquiring in tone. Named 'Of Billboards and Buses' in 1.1, the cultural illustrations focused on working out which questions might not be straightforward through 'Atheist Bus Campaign' media notes. 'Simply Starting with a Question: Who is God?' was the main title of the middle part of chapter 1, itself split into three related parts – 'Freedom Outside the Trains,' 'Churchgoers with Strange Enquiries' and 'Applying Concepts to God-thoughts'.

In 1.2, these elements continued to pose even more difficult questions around components related to how Marcella and churchgoers might answer the simple-yet-not-simple question – 'Who is God?' – by utilising various contexts, such as remembered Argentinian train platforms and people-first ideological freedom in Marcella's writing, and, in churchgoers' thoughts, the strongly honest insistence of varieties of options in answering this question, and by utilising the (grand)father-God discourses to be pinned close to the top. In closing this chapter, questions were asked in relation to what possibilities there might be in understanding 'God' from different kinds of opposing academic/practical viewpoints, while also beginning to mark the tensions being realised between Marcella's and churchgoers' differences related to the enquiry focus. In relation to both, there were no queries about any existence of God *per se*, but, rather, very different independent probes about what opposing God-depictions might reveal.

Then, in 1.3, with its title 'Deconstructing Divinity's Impossible Implications', there were concluding points in initially utilising Derrida's written deconstructive ideas – which involved discussions around gaps, traces and spaces – in order to open-up (and

challenge implicitly) the dialogue already reached throughout by widening the questioning ideas far more exposing than the limited premise reached by Marcella and churchgoers milieu alone.

With the first chapter's introductory context arrived at through a durable questioning outlook, 'Troubling Texts: Critically Contextual Bible Studies' in chapter 2 took elements of the same premise about God in the first, and naturally widened the parameter in its principles of enquiries related to the Bible in the second; in other words, the same tensions of God-possibilities in chapter 1 were then progressively moved to different reactions in chapter 2, and this was done by responses that focused specifically on biblical themes across the same paradigm shift between Marcella and churchgoers. Entitled 'Of Stamps and Scribbles,' section 2.1 told of cultural illustrations in enquiries around the story of the way the Bible could be innovatively enclosed by deep-fried, postage-stamp, glass-case versions, and from which alternative differences in 'material Bible' and 'biblical material' could be anticipated.

Continuing to utilise the dual object-subject rubric of 'material Bible' and 'biblical material' led to asking further questions of God as understood by linkage to related biblical situations. In moving to a point of considering the topic's complex trajectories via the title 'Bring Biblical Material to the Material Bible' in 2.2, like the first chapter, it was then split into a trio of parts – 'Ingesting Indecent Imaginings,' 'Carefully Remembered Entities' and 'Tampering Tensions of Biblical Texts'. Elements on such themes initiated exploration dialogues around the role the Bible has through tensions felt between churchgoers and Marcella along similar lines; Bible-drinkers' ingestion remembrances and alternative per/versions-plus-permutations transgression options, for instance, in direct tension with churchgoers' attention focused on Bible-status, and often by an eminence complete with holding it as a nostalgically comforting entity to be protected and guarded through being sensed as containing God-inspired texts.

Rather than reaching an assimilated point of unassuming nous fusion, the tensions between both Marcella and churchgoers accumulated in an irruption instead, and as one that strongly revealed a clash of paradigms found in both locales. Following on from this, 'Unravelling some Bifurcations in Textual Ways' was the title of the last deconstructive elements of 2.3, in which Derrida in his writing, like Marcella, was seen as affirmatively confident in fully accepting what he was sure mattered most – which was discovered here in relation to such things as forgiveness – by a strongly freeing

contentment; and this initiated creativity that posed how usurping impossibilities like 'can God forgive?' questions could imply.

'Performance Anxieties: Identity Politics for Divinities' in chapter 3 faced even more inquisitive thoughts through Christological orientation, and largely by a nascent God that could be best sensed as being heterosexually male and hegemonically masculine. In 3.1, 'Of Coathangers and Conceptions' began with media illustrations arranged through David Mach's *Die Harder*, Jo Clifford's *Jesus, Queen of Heaven* and St. Matthew-in-the-city's Mary-Joseph billboard story, all of which collectively offered alternative versions of revisable Christological possibilities that could be quite differently reached.

'Running Christology past an Itinerant Galilean' was the middle part of chapter 3.2, which itself split into three parts – 'Identity politics for a Creative Jesus,' 'The Christ of the Church's Bible' and 'Queering God between Christological Lines'. In each, tensions were raised in questions that were asked around identity politics involved in thinking about Christianity's Jesus-and-God through Christology. In terms of various options related to such elements of Marcella's, the discussion shared how wildly free, playfully diverse, dialogically racy and non-conventional a 'Bi/Christ' figure and 'Queer God' identity are arranged through 'critical bisexuality' options; and, in many churchgoers' standardly (yet innovatively) preservative protection, too, such alternative options offered far safer options to be carefully held as required in realising how open or closed a morphed divine identity might implicitly reach.

Unlike Marcella's thoughts on the human figure of a limited Jesus, contingent with his own failings, and so full of ambiguities just like us, the tensions in this chapter strongly incorporated churchgoers' opposing ideas involved in engagement with a Christ that is largely understood through ideas deeply held in Christianity's standard form (*i.e.*, one understood as implicitly linked to a Bible-divinity collaboration now sensed complete), and from which there is, and cannot be, any true reinvention in the way that Marcella's writing fully allows; yet, from this, ideas of God-concept multiplication then led to non-fixed deconstruction named 'Heterosexual Masculinities in Identity Closets' in 3.3. It was through such apparatus of inventive interlude that provided freeing idioms of such things as 'messianic structure' and 'innumerable genders' as those to be found in Derrida's lexicon, and by extracting such possibilities as ones that are also asking 'is God's identity identifiable?' in return.

Now having summarised elements of those found within the past 3 chapters in Part One, *Deconstructing the Bible and its God*, the next stop is to swiftly outline those represented in the single chapter of Part Two, *Challenging Contexts for the Biblical God*. 'Storytelling Spaces: Treading upon the Church's God' in chapter 4 incorporated central elements that reached an understanding of triadic concluding sections, although slightly different to the earlier chapters mentioned above. By following a similarly understood introductory format in its first section, the final chapter initiated relevant media components; so, 4.1 began with 'Of Lightbulbs and Landmarks' that involved asking some revealing questions through a deconstructive lens of illuminated possibilities in Martin Creed's *Everything Is Going To Be Alright*, Nathan Coley's *There Will Be No Miracles Here*, and those empty gravestones found in Jupiter Artland's *In Memory* (also Coley's).

This was done by innovatively switching between wide philosophical terms through such things as light and darkness, fulfilment and emptiness, death and life; and, as transitional spaces, they revealed even stronger questions about how enquiries that are no longer living might, despite this, still point insistently to such a radical parameter of asking where life could come to be found. Through the past, present and future, a sense of ambiguous remembrance, and even more subtle gift held close, is also the forthcoming part of creative signs liberally echoed after the end of this particular epilogue named 'Indecent Impossibilities in Re-imagining God' in 4.3, which is a place that persistently infers that questions are kept widely incomplete.

In the epilogue, while such unexpected transgression appears to keep all its questioning possibilities alive as the thesis' pages wind-up, it is preceded by 4.2 (by involving a juncture entitled 'When Trespassing on Gender and Sexuality Collide') which we are currently, in these concluding points, at present. Although the discussions in 4.2 have already continued to focus on the constant paradigm shift tensions that relate to churchgoers' practical examples alongside Marcella's academic ideas, this is also a point of ably posing some additional enquiries through a preliminary conclusion of its own. Such tensions are found to be far bigger, for instance, than any limited academic project could intend to implicitly find by making mistaken assumptions that it has already reached an easily straightforward concluding point; so, even if still hopeful of some form of conclusion, life itself happens to ask the newly active non-programmatic continuation of enquiring to be its strongest reply.

But to first recap quickly on elements that have now been reached so far, and before considering a few points of Marcella's work in particular as it has been used here, the chapters of this thesis are those which have involved a voyage of actively identifying tensions through questions asked in relation to the work of Marcella and Derrida, Edinburgh churchgoers and some recent media excerpts; and these tensions are not limited to any of the particulars especially, but rather are revealed through the locations that have selectively combined them together in utilising some central questions of God-possibilities that have now been regularly used throughout. It would seem mistaken to latch onto, and focus on, one principal player alone, but, nonetheless, there are a few elements that could allow for some dialogue around how Marcella's written academic-plus-practical elements are identified in this project; after all, as she put it at an earlier time, "any practical theology walks the path of strategies because the task of understanding change is collective, as is the task of maintaining the status quo" (Marcella, 1997: 45).

As has been touched on regularly (and found, most noticeably, in selected footnotes) in the chapters so far, opting to focus on a few rudiments of Marcella's work especially need not involve either homage or criticism but rather, on the contrary, a way that brings some relevant enquiries to the project itself. As already mentioned about this venture – which has mapped tensions that were identified in tandem across opposing paradigms – my use of Marcella's work has, throughout, involved selected fragments of her thoughts in collaboration with small excerpts from Church of Scotland churchgoers, similarly. Beginning with my own 'Acknowledgements' page, Marcella's 'strong imagination, wild radicalism and creative vision' involved elements that provided sparks (and risky humour) that were initiated by engaging conversations found everywhere in her writing. Especially after *Indecent Theology* (2000), her own sense of place in the academic environment was one noted year-on-year in the ways in which she gained significant international respect. Yet, it is also worth noting that, as principal supervisor of this thesis, Marcella did not encourage me to initiate the sociological project in Edinburgh churches that has now been centrally realised and significantly important to all of its chapters.

There could have been many reasons for that, but, looking back, it seems that, in academia, she lost some of her earlier valuable insistence that the strongest questions should be sourced from everyday life's ordinariness; and, as she quickly gained much

honour in her Edinburgh achievements, of which she was rightly proud, those were the rudiments unnoticed in places like Argentina and Dundee that, themselves, provided such revealing elements still creeping into her writing with great success. Rarely did that academic prospect seem to bring enough opportunities for much engagement with people outside of it in the here-and-now Scotland; and perhaps Marcella missed that too. Her locale in formal university settings limited and changed her, as a point that was stifling some parts of her earlier people-first engagement in this respect, and so that, as time proceeded, the radical elements of her written work also became even more philosophically radical while far less practically inclined.

Following on from mentioning this element of her academic role, Marcella's incredibly powerful writing skills were particularly effective in forwarding what she, herself, considered to be critically held, and this could be understood in certain ways. There was power in the way in which, on purpose, Marcella held closely to such particular elements – found in her books and articles – of her own viewpoint that she actively chose to remain vague. Such nebulous spirituality provided Marcella with categorical ideas that permitted her to be named as a mystic with her own rules. Yet, unlike most, she was able to pull it off so successfully because her writing was remarkably distinct in such a lucidly engaging, if not entrancing, way, and through a manner that was largely literary in style; so, Marcella drew readers into her theology with an invitation to be captivated by it.

Not really randomly unclear or flitting, but, rather, implicitly sensed by confident persuasion, Marcella also used personal power to direct advantage; and she achieved great success in ensuring that she could retain a personality of being radically different. As an example related to such points found in selected chapters here, Marcella's vision, at times, involved powerful moves in writing of exotic places in far-away lands that few people had visited before, still presenting her adventures quite academically in tone, but utilising such possibilities with and through such surety that covered-up for elements sensed as largely anecdotal fiction at times. But, perhaps, by actively denying theology a limited, fixed systematic system on purpose, the flip-side of this kind of powerful persuasion is that, in and through it, Marcella brought remarkably unique ideas about things so central to life – things such as freedom, inclusion and justice – through her imagination-filled vocational career.

This kind of optimistic freedom was so evident in Marcella's ideas around an innovatively opened-up anything-goes God (so powerfully made and playfully noted in both *Indecent Theology* and *The Queer God*, and especially by exemplar humour at times), a God so wildly risky in living in total opposition to systematic rules. Normally held by those in power rather than standardized Theology-of-God-remits permits (and equips with conventionally limited options), Marcella never faltered in her 'God' possibilities – there were no questioning possibilities of those that weighed-up divinity packages by pros and cons – through her involvement of eruptive chasms of new God-concepts that released re-imaging discoveries to her central baseline. In her writing, this was a strange but strong God that could be realised as ever-changing, never fixed; and such new ways of understanding God-thoughts released Marcella personally into endless thoughts of creative ideas by deconstructing life in bigger, interesting circles. But maybe such questions are tensions found marked within this thesis themselves, for they are the ones manifested not by a straightforward acceptance, but instead by offering the way of continuing to discover such enquiries of innovative possibilities already evident therein.

If standard conclusions might apparently be noticed as flat, progressive points that appear to be commonly straightforward (albeit sometimes powerfully limited and, at times, much too easily made), then non-conclusions might be found in a more alarmingly damaged place, apparently hiding out of control and too hard to handle. A particular conclusion here – which is, in the end, a non-conclusion in fact – begins by challenging the academic 'everyone-knows' bias that denies creativity the valuable chance to keep all real sense of deduction in place of such an open-book, which is another term for a non-conclusion full of possibilities. This thesis has been written from tensions found across paradigm shifts which were arrived at, and revealed through, those strongly enquiring (impossibly indecent) questions about God. Most especially, this can be found overtly in the introductory chapter, and with parameters centrally confirmed in non-progressive widening by focusing on the particular elements found in the various situations of the rest; and it was actively designed imaginatively in such a way that could enable reaching a fully positive open-book by exceeding convention with practical insistence of noting value related to non-conclusions.

Ending with such a good premise in this thesis is both necessary and important, because perhaps the strongest conclusion that can be drawn about all that has been revealed throughout are those many points now understood as open-book (non-

conclusion) questions. In other words, the questions readers might have been asking as the pages have been folded, and each chapter passed by, are then opened up to their own situations and lives once the thesis is closed, with an open-book related to possibilities around an impossibly indecent God to begin. This is the best conclusion to be found *because* such a sense of creative non-conclusion potential is at the heart of what it has all been about; for a point of keeping open questions individually leads to such things as freedom, justice, and life itself.

The particular questions that have developed around tensions found in many different points in this thesis are not to be found in either Marcella's theological or Derrida's philosophical writing especially, and not through contemporary media excerpts or Edinburgh churchgoers' discussions individually, but, instead, by the connections made in finding parts of each element of every chapter that were combined together, and from which collective tensions were drawn. But these tensions are still not fixed, but, on the contrary, are now enveloped in an unfixed open-book prism from which others can now realise their own wish to continue in any creative enquiring questions about what the tensions might practically mean. This is why a critically possible non-conclusion outlook in relation to the future of theology is also radically opened up, too, by living through the gaps already happening; and perhaps by daring not to stop.

So, like Coley's oak board on the floor in concluding chapter 4.1, Derrida's use of the *aporia* "means that you cannot walk further, it's a blocked way" but, in a way that makes it neither negative nor paralysis but futural in orientation, "on the contrary, it is an ordeal, a test, a crucial moment through which we have to go, even if we are stuck" (Derrida, 2004a: 63). As such, the *aporia* – as "an irresolvable tension between incommensurables" (Hart, 2004: 116) – is a necessary practice of responsible decision-bringing that is usefully enabling; and, in Derrida's thought, it does so *in order to* defy any definite closure by instead provoking possibilities. Just as impossible tensions need not be considered negative positions, "as you know," Derrida has said, "the *aporia* for me doesn't mean simple paralysis. No way," because, "on the contrary, it's the condition of proceeding, of making a decision, of going forward" (Derrida in Caputo, Hart and Sherwood, 2005: 43). So, whether going forward might mean proceeding by stepping over, or skirting the edges, of a wooden block placed in a less than helpful position, any decision-point always happens as a pause before the choice is made; and what Derrida

has said repeatedly is that the *aporia* is in no way a negative stop but a vital one for it is amidst "contradictory injunctions, impossible choices, that we make a choice" (Derrida, 2001c: 62).[251]

In terms of some of the questions that have already been asked in reaching the last pages of this final chapter, there are implications that evolve something of a returning to those gaps that were first opened up in the first introductory chapter's conclusions, gaps so necessary in Derrida's thinking that are "unbridgeable" at "the possibility of a between" in opening up alternatives:

> … within a discourse, within an institution, within cultures and politics, in order to give place to the possibility of another taking place, [and] the unprecedented event by which transformation, translation, interruption have their chances (Wolfreys, 2007: 11).

Such sense of transformations – of radical possibilities – frame the questioning initiated not just by Derrida's, but also Marcella's and, importantly, churchgoers' thoughts on those issues found within the thesis overall.

Ending this part of the final chapter gives space to continue to evolve questions that need to be "continually invented, or reinvented" (Caputo, 1997b: 138) rather than ever determine the desire of any definitive, predictable and fixed stability as conclusions. In Derrida's reading, decisions have critically enabling roles that mark "the undecidable, the incalculable and unprogrammable, the un-fence-in-able" (Royle, 2003: 5) of everything that might come; and it is from such positions that deconstruction "shatters the stable horizons of expectation, transgressing the possible and conceivable" (Caputo, 1997b: 164), with an opened-up epilogue between Marcella and Derrida rather than determining a finished, fixed, and final conclusion.[252] And in the epilogue, issues of

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[251] Unpredictable impossibilities of responsibility surround the choice of what will yet happen in what in the future is still coming to mean, and, in a similar way to the *aporia*, the *pharmakon* is also a concept that underlines this unpredictability of choice-making further still, for it "is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside" (Derrida, 2004: 40) but always open knowing the difficulties of its questions. While in deconstruction the *aporia* is considered as positive in recognition of decisions that happen, the *pharmakon* makes it clear that it would be impossible to think that there is "no such thing as a harmless remedy" that might ever be considered an antidote that is "simply beneficial" (Derrida, 1981: 99).

[252] Catherine Belsey made an interesting comment relating to Derrida's thinking of ideas of decisions in saying that "deconstruction might, of course, look like a reason for refusing to take a position, for remaining neutral. But neutrality is not in practice neutral at all, since it leaves things as they were, or as they would have been anyway. Neutrality makes decisions, but always for the status quo" (Belsey, 2002 [1980]: 124). If choosing not to decide is a decision of

people and life amidst potential possibilities are moved towards this thesis' initial question, 'An Impossibly Indecent God?'

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its own, making all decisions then that come with necessary risk brings a place in which we "do the best we can in the light of what it is possible to know" (Belsey, 2002 [1980]: 125).

4.3
Epilogue
Indecent Impossibilities in re-imagining God

If the divine is understood (at least) as that which summons
or stands for the best in us, or better than the best, understood
therefore as a fluidity or process rather than straight rigidity,
what sort of queer theology does it imply?
Can we do without it?
Grace Jantzen (2003: 345)

I can remember the day I met Marcella for the first time in her top floor office in Edinburgh University's New College. It was a small and relatively dark, tidy room, without a great deal of books, defying my own imagined assumptions about what it should look like. The visit seemed formal, and Marcella was sitting in a big chair on the opposite side of the plain wooden desk between us, a desk that was itself flanked by two large iconic prints on each side. On the right, and closest to the door, was *The Singing Butler* by contemporary Scottish painter Jack Vettriano; and, on the left, was post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin's *The Vision After The Sermon*. Looking back at the encounter with its unusual print combination, these particular paintings for me mark the strongest image of 'Marcella' that I now have; and, in retrospect, it is because of this that they both convey – through the serendipity of their unexpected juxtaposition – some critical elements of Marcella's thinking as a result.[253]

Perhaps more commonly known by its alternative title, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, Gauguin's 1888 painting from Pont-Aven in Brittany depicts women listening to a sermon based on Genesis 32: 22-32.[254] Traditionally dressed in contrasting black and white, the painting's congregating Breton women provide its focal point; they are much stronger in size and position than the more subordinate Jacob-and-Angel scene, the

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[253] Marcella and I never discussed anything in relation to Vettriano's or Gauguin's paintings, so the ideas of the next couple of pages are only my own surmising. It still seems something of a missed opportunity by not asking her thoughts on both.

[254] Of this biblical passage, the key excerpt relating to the painting's title is that of the figure of Jacob spending "a whole night wrestling with a mysterious Angel" from Genesis 32. The 'Angel' that the biblical passage features is an ambiguous one, nonetheless, and is one open for conjecture: "There are a number of interpretations theologically: the angel is seen by some to be Angel Uriel, by others to be God, or goodness itself. More plausibly in modern theology is the notion that Jacob's struggle with the angel is, in fact, the inner struggle that takes place in every Christian soul" (McKenzie, 2005, October 28).

latter drama being one that Gauguin played out upon a vivid deep-red background that was intentionally placed in a less immediate location towards the top right corner. Of his reasoning for distorting these visual components in a revealing letter to his friend Vincent van Gogh, Gauguin wrote that:

> … in this picture the landscape and the struggle exist only in the imagination of the people praying owing to the sermon, which is why there is contrast between the life-size people and the struggle in its non-natural disproportionate landscape (cited in Thomson, 2005: 53).

Recognising why, through Gauguin's personal thoughts on it, the intriguing women in the painting assume distracted and indirect positions makes understanding it easier: some look downcast, while others appear quite undefined; the eyes of some of the women are closed, while the faces of a few of the forefront figures are entirely hidden behind their large bonnets. Such a technique appears to wrench the realism of straightforward 'seeing' into limitless imaginative forays, presenting figural moves which open up the myriad possibilities of reading potential through each of the women's vision-of-the-sermon-ideas individually. In this sense, and stripped of any realism, the painting then exudes ambiguities and subtleties because its meaning is open to endlessly variant meanings left permanently undefined.

Without any definitive Jacob/Angel event *per se* – beyond those elements already found through the symbolic tokenism of Gauguin's own imagination – all else that is left are possibilities, and these are the kind that unlock potential avenues for new ideas. "Art is an abstraction," Gauguin wrote in another of his letters, this time to his friend Claude-Emile Schuffenecker: "Extract it from nature while dreaming in front of it and pay more attention to the act of creation than to the result" (cited in Thomson, 2005: 42). If art's abstraction and theology's deconstructive forces allow for any sense of alliance then it is by latching onto "the act of creation" of Gauguin's phrase that both might spin intently on in seeking out endless possibilities

It is by re-writing new places for theological options that Marcella repeatedly re-imagined alternatives for people and re-discovered options for God, for she believed it was "our task and our joy" to "… simply recognise God sitting amongst us, at any time" (2003a: 3).[255] Again and again in her work, Marcella refused to undermine the necessity

[255] Marcella was someone well-known for "her consistent – and insistently transgressive – attempts to place bodies at the centre of theology" (Rivera, 2010: 89) and even if the bodies were textually and ideologically understood at the same time, her focus invoked a

of open places and the visionary transformation – the possible impossibilities even – that they could bring: "I am not talking about the need to have an 'inclusive' theology or church … but a different theology" (2005c: 4). Like Jacob's strange encounter with the Angel, Marcella's outlook involved an everyday wrestling match between safe and conventional theological decisions; it was something she was seen doing regularly by reaching beyond the standardised frames that she invariably rejected in forceful ways. As described at various junctures, the most important issues found to be inimical to Marcella's quest involved focusing on placing people first in all of her questioning. Marcella's people-first theology provided a necessary agenda through which she could sense the radical possibilities of finding alternatives for God-thoughts:

> Sometimes theology should declare an independence day, and start anew, from the real grassroots of marginal communities to find a God who is less domesticated, and less brainwashed than the displaced centre God now located at the margins of theological reflections (2001b: 32).

And, regardless of how impossibly indecent the pursuit might have sounded, Marcella always found in this risky endeavour some vital purpose in theology. She was encouraged by the fact that "theology has its own deconstructive forces, its own instabilities and imprecisions," which were possibilities that still made it "worth the effort, [and] a path of permanent revelation and rediscovery" (2000a: 148-149).

Nowadays it is ubiquitously known through high exposure via popular postcards and prints, and Vettriano's most famous painting – *The Singing Butler* – is often recognised outside of the art scene, working so well simply because many people like it. The painting depicts a woman in scarlet and a man in black dancing a waltz, strongly and with verve, in evening sunlight on a wet beach; and the dancers are accompanied by two onlookers holding umbrellas against the wind and rain. The ambiguities surrounding the dancing people and their companions immediately invokes questions –

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variety of bodies that cropped up in the process of her attempts to underline the fact that "life is less static than theological systems" (2000a: 108) with strong determination. Some of the most revealing ones were anecdotes from her earlier years in Argentina. "I was an adolescent when my family faced eviction," she wrote in 2000, invoking an important question about how her ideological vision of people-first theology perhaps began:

> We were given 24 hours to pay overdue rents or leave our house. When the police arrived my mother and myself moved out our few belongings on to the street: some bags of clothes, a box with tea and rice, two chairs … [and] my mother and myself ceased to be people. Economic theories became people, and evicted us because somehow we became things that did not fit their scheme. The economic system was never evicted; only my mother and myself … [and] theology has literally been putting people out on the pavements of the church for centuries (2000d: 54).

questions of who they are, what they are doing, and what stories they are telling – and, a bit like the freedom found in the thinking minds of Gauguin's Breton women, they skip over the painting's surface by reaching into imagination's fullness.

I imagine that Marcella liked it because it is a scene full of ambiguous possibilities; for it brings a tale of adversary and persistence, invoking stories of life's unexpected felting in the process of the bringing of collisions, or even collusions, between the unlikely in a sexually charged cauldron. Brimming from the painting is multiplicity, of alliances sensed against the odds and the simple presence of bodies at the focus-point, refusing and rebelling while dancing on a wet beach: who says they didn't all dance together once the rain stopped; and might the waltz have been an Argentine Tango on the rainy beach; and how could we ever know how many other dancers in the rain existed outside the painting's limited frame?

'Choreographies' is the title Christie McDonald used for an article written about a dialogue she had with Derrida in 1982, and she launched their conservation with the following quotation: "Emma Goldman, a maverick feminist from the late nineteenth century, once said of the feminist movement, 'If I can't dance I don't want to be part of your revolution'" (McDonald in Derrida, 1982: 66) – and it was an opening of McDonald's that Derrida determined to be "a good idea" (Derrida, 1982: 67) – for it meant that there was "already, already a sign of life, a sign of the dance" (Derrida, 1982: 67). "What kind of a dance would there be," Derrida continued, "or would there be one at all, if the sexes were not exchanged according to rhythms that vary considerably?" (Derrida, 1982: 76). Those kinds of questions, as already discussed more fully earlier in chapter 3.3, about the dream of innumerable genders, and the "joyful, dance-like working off of places, multiplying the places of sexual spacing" (Caputo, 1997b: 105) in Derrida's choreographies (of non-original, supplementing dancing), opens a view of possibilities that are themselves marked by new things. It is as if an event is opened up to and by the future.

Yet, the herald of any true 'event' in Derrida is found to be understood in the radically different realm of impossibility, just like all the words that he similarly loved to imagine a future through (words like hospitality, gift and justice): it is an event deep in the realm of "the ever-open hollowness of this possibility, the possibility of non-arrival" (Derrida, 2006b [1993]: 536), and of something entirely new, unpredictable and different as a result. While inadvertently preserving the current weather analogy by linking it to

something so apparently novel as seaside tangoing, Derrida's description of the event seems especially fitting. He said that an event:

> … cannot be reduced to the fact of something happening. It may rain this evening or it may not, but that is not an absolute event. I know what rain is; so it is not an absolutely different singularity. In such cases what happens is not an arrival. An arrival must be absolutely different: the other that I expect to be unexpected, that I do not await (Derrida, 2006b [1993]: 536).

This means that it is entirely unpredictable even against any predictable blue-sky rain-free days, and even if the unexpected – a shower, or downpour, or even snowstorm – might indeed happen this is still, and cannot be, an event. The event "envisages radical passivity" (Deutscher, 2005: 105) and needs to be totally unexpected, including those "of which we are only barely conscious and these may *also* be tremendously important to human life" (Deutscher, 2005: 106). As such, the event is centred within any future not yet known.[256] "As long as things are clearly 'possible'," Derrida explained, "we are cruising along on automatic pilot, nothing special is demanded of us, the oars are up, and we are going with the flow, hardly making any decisions at all. Nothing is happening; the 'event' is not in play" (Derrida in Caputo, 1997a: 68).

The Church exists, as Marcella believed, as a similar system that is also on auto-pilot, and one in which the claim that "nothing is happening" relates to its fixedly static and predictably stable, historically held and systematically styled position that connects to a particularly biblically-linked God-version; defined by rules rather than decisions, the Church's "oars are up" (to use Derrida's phrase) in preventing new, radically different futures of who Christianity's God might be. Always challenging this premise, Marcella, in coming from a strongly challenging deconstructive viewpoint of indecency, found potential by ensuring that a clear division was found between those elements of the system (*i.e.* doctrines, dogmas, and the Church) and those others affected by such fixity (people, God, and Christianity's potential). "If by religion you mean a set of beliefs, dogmas, or institutions – the church, *e.g.* – then I would say," Derrida concurred, "that religion as such can be deconstructed, and not only can be but should be deconstructed, sometimes in the name of faith" (Derrida, 1997: 21). To deconstruct things in such (indecent) ways was how Marcella imagined her theological vocation, and, just as

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[256] As Derrida has said, the future comes with a necessary sense of ambiguity and fear, for "a future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow" (Derrida in Royle, 2003: 110), and, as such, would not properly be a future at all.

deconstruction asks that "any conclusion is a closure, or an attempt at closure, which must necessarily fail" (Derrida in Fagan, 2007: 225), and because the future "is not paralysis, it is a chance" (Derrida, 2003b: 63), this was always considered to be worth the effort; after all, prying open options for people and God was in many ways, as Derrida once said, also "the advent of justice" (Derrida, 1992: 18).[257]

But the riskiness of fear or anxious failings, or the growing ambiguous sense of loss that can upset all placid security, naturally means that "we are always trying to close the gap" (Gaston, 2006: 113), even though the tiniest of gaps – fissures haunting our every security – are unfailing and never-ceasing, threatening any finality with an evident persistent and unsettling menace despite all efforts. Ghosts scaring the gaps bring risk but also a point from which we "learn to live by learning how to talk with ghosts" (Caputo, 1997a: 147). Talking of the legacy from Marcella and Derrida moving to unknown places of a radical future, such hauntologies (Derrida, 1994: 10) involve taking chances and accepting tensions *in order to be* found haunting – in and through, beneath and between, the gaps, traces, spaces of the languished twists of the whispering questions. Perhaps indecent futures are already on the way to becoming new happenings, even if only known retrospectively, just like the event. As Derrida believed:

> … Christianity is the most plastic, the most open, religion, the most prepared, the best prepared, to face unpredictable transformations. So perhaps as the deconstruction of Christianity develops we won't be able to recognize the roots of the Christian religion anymore and yet, nevertheless, we will still be able to say that this is Christianity … I have the obscure feeling that something is happening to Christianity, an unpredictable earthquake. And that's not necessarily negative (Derrida in Sherwood and Hart, 2005: 33).[258]

Ambiguities and survival, fear and loss are similarly "not necessarily negative" either, for such positions of insecurity open possibilities through such an "unpredictable earthquake" in which impossibilities are to be found.

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[257] As earlier understood in 'Chapter Cartographies,' justice, in Derrida's writing, exists in an entirely different realm than the law, involving a point where "justice is an experience of the impossible" (Derrida, 1992: 16) and "deconstruction is justice" (Derrida, 1992: 35), through a place of understanding in which "justice – or justice as it is promises to be beyond what it actually is – always has an eschatological dimension" (Derrida, 2001d: 20).

[258] Echoes are also to be found in parts of John Caputo's writing, too, where he considered that, not only are churches and Christianity differently understood, but, in relation to the religious system, God can be understood across a spectral alternity: "God is more important than religion, as the ocean is more important than the raft, the latter bearing all the marks of being constituted by human beings. Religion, which is a human practice, is always deconstructible in the light of the love of God, which is not deconstructible" (Caputo, 2001: 113).

In an article for *Le Monde* a few months before he died, Derrida voiced how "everything that I say about survival as a complication of the life and death opposition proceeds from my unconditional affirmation of life" (Derrida in Butler, 2005: 33). Continuing with this, he then explained:

> Survival, that is the life beyond life, the life that is more than life. And the discourse that I offer is not petrified or mortified; it is the affirmation of a living on who prefers life and surviving death, because survival which is *not simply what remains*, is the most intense life possible
> (Derrida in Butler, 2005: 33).

Commenting on these words of Derrida's in an article written after his death of such thoughts that he held, Judith Butler conveyed how "we participate in a certain wild future of inheritance" (Butler, 2005: 32). It is once the voice is extinguished and the words are no longer that allows play to happen; a playing with the ideas and the visions that have become part of the vital element of the surviving possibilities: "we are not sure 'who' survives, but there is a surviving that takes place, spectral, haunted, in and through the trace" (Butler, 2005: 32).

So, ending without an event, "let us play surprise" (Derrida, 1982: 66), bringing gaps, traces and spaces into possible impossibilities or impossible possibilities, disallowing the denial of closure to be found by opening-up a non-conclusion. "Yes, perhaps. Why not?" (Derrida, 1982: 76).

And why not …

Perhaps the only answers are already to be found in the questions.

… why not indecency's impossibilities

An Impossibly Indecent God?

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