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■ FRANCES YOUNG

God's Presence

A Contemporary Recapitulation
of Early Christianity



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God's Presence

In 2011, Frances Young delivered the Bampton Lectures in Oxford to great acclaim. She offered a systematic theology with contemporary coherence by engaging in conversation with the fathers of the church – those who laid down the parameters of Christian theology and enshrined key concepts in the creeds – and exploring how their teachings can be applied today, despite the differences in our intellectual and ecclesial environments. This book results from a thorough rewriting of those lectures in which Young explores the key topics of Christian doctrine in a way that is neither simply dogmatic nor simply historical. She addresses the congruence of head and heart, through academic and spiritual engagement with God's gracious accommodation to human limitations. Christianity and biblical interpretation are discussed in depth, and the book covers key topics including creation, anthropology, Christology, soteriology, spirituality, ecclesiology and Mariology, making it invaluable to those studying historical and constructive theology.

FRANCES YOUNG previously served as Edward Cadbury Professor of Theology, Dean of Arts, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *The Making of the Creeds* (1991), *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (1997) and *Brokenness and Blessing* (2007). She is co-editor of *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (with Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth, Cambridge, 2004) and the first volume of *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (with Margaret M. Mitchell, Cambridge, 2006).

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The cover image, created by Silvia Dimitrova, depicts the loving friendship of Jesus for Lazarus understood as a person with learning disabilities, a novel motif (see pp. 19–22) of particular significance for the integration sought in this theological project. Lazarus' chariot doubles as wheelchair and symbol of heavenly ascent, while the building stands both for the daily home-building of his carers, Martha and Mary, and one of the many mansions in the Father's house. The tree of life represents Lazarus' resurrection, which is still to come, and also the way in which trees fascinate one whose sense of the world is limited. The composition's implicit sphere, broken only by Christ's stepping down to earth to touch our lives, is the traditional iconographic symbol of God's perfection and encompassing presence.

Preface

This book is the fruit of a long-standing dream. Some thirty years ago, when I had completed the first edition of *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*,¹ I felt tooled up to produce what I then conceived as a *Theology of the Fathers*, somewhat on the model of theologies of the New Testament. But that idea stimulated the question as to what exactly such a thing might be. Did it mean an exercise in strictly historical reconstruction? Or would it be a hermeneutical exercise in retrieval or appropriation, or some kind of dialogue between theology then and now? One thing I was clear about – that I wanted to explore theological argument in a historically responsible way, rather than pursue the so-called development of doctrine. Circumstances over the years meant that this project was left for the so-called leisure of retirement, though meanwhile attempts were made to scope what might be involved, and ideas were tried out in various papers, lectures and talks along the way, excerpts being incorporated into the text of this book.² Now, in the aftermath of the second edition of *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, this dream was realized in the Bampton Lectures for 2011. Each chapter in the book corresponds to one lecture, but here considerably more material is presented than could be delivered on any occasion.

I am grateful to the Bampton Electors for providing the opportunity, and for their encouragement and hospitality. I acknowledge

¹ *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

² Key papers have been collected and republished in *Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity* (Farnham: Ashgate Variorum, 2012).

with thanks invitations to deliver series of lectures at King's College, London and New College, Edinburgh, in which ideas were developed and tested out; neither the F. D. Maurice Lectures nor the Croall Lectures have been published, but both were significant steps towards what is now here. The enterprise of dialogue with the fathers was anticipated at a more popular level in the Sarum Theological Lectures, published as *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality*,³ though that work focussed on key themes rather than doctrines.

The encouragement of my erstwhile colleague, David Ford, and his willingness to read the draft of each chapter, was vital in keeping my nose to the grindstone, as was the expectation of certain Oxford friends, notably Andrew Teal, Paul Joyce and Sister Barbara June of the Convent of the Incarnation. The profound influence of Jean Vanier will be frequently evident in the following pages. My thanks to such supportive friends.

But there are two particular persons without whom none of this would have been possible, Arthur, and Bob, my husband and fellow-carer. Neither of them can know or understand how profound has been their contribution, and the least I can do is dedicate this volume to them.

³ *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality*, Sarum Theological Lectures for 2004 (London: DLT, 2007).

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between the Spirituality of John Wesley and the Greek Fathers,' in S. T. Kimbrough, Jr (ed.), *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (2002); and 'The "Penultimate" Nature of the Church – the *Eschaton* Is Not Yet!' in S. T. Kimbrough, Jr (ed.), *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (2007), pp. 199–211; T&T Clark, Continuum Books, for 'Theotokos: Mary and the Pattern of Fall and Redemption in the Theology of Cyril of Alexandria' in Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating (eds.), *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* (2003), pp. 55–74; and 'Hermeneutical Questions: The Ordination of Women in the Light of Biblical and Patristic Typology' in Ian Jones, Janet Wootton and Kirsty Thorpe (eds.), *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives* (2008); the *Australian Biblical Review* for 'Allegory and Atonement' in the *Australian Biblical Review* 35 (1987), Special Issue in Honour of Professor Eric Osborn, 107–14; the Ecclesiastical History Society and Boydell and Brewer Ltd for 'Naked or Clothed? Eschatology and the Doctrine of Creation' in Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul*, Studies in Church History 45 (2009); the Methodist Publishing House for 'University Sermon for the Tercentenary of the Birth of John Wesley', *Epworth Review* 31 (2004), 44–51; the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship for *Presbyteral Ministry in the Catholic Tradition or Why Shouldn't Women be Priests?* (1994); and 'The Materialism of the Christian Tradition', *Bulletin* No. 138 (Epiphany 2011), 4–10. Many thanks also go to Rev. Dr. Andrew Teal, Chaplain, Pembroke College, Oxford, for compiling the index to this volume, with the assistance of Chris Long.

Abbreviations

ACW	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i> , New York: Newman Press
ANCF	<i>Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers</i> , Edinburgh: T&T Clark
ARCIC	The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission
CCL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i> , Turnhout: Brepols
CSCO	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i> , Leuven: Peeters
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> , Vienna: Kommission zur Herausgabe des CSEL
CWS	<i>Classics of Western Spirituality</i> , New York: Paulist Press
DLT	Darton, Longman & Todd
ET	English Translation
FC	<i>Fathers of the Church</i> , Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press
GCS	<i>Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller</i> , Berlin: Akademie Verlag
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i> , Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i> , Cambridge University Press
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> , Oxford University Press
LCC	<i>Library of Christian Classics</i> , London: SCM Press
LCL	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i> , London: Heinemann/Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

ABBREVIATIONS

MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , London: Parker
NS	New Series
NT	New Testament
OECT	<i>Oxford Early Christian Texts</i> , Oxford University Press 1971
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
PTS	<i>Patristische Texte und Studien</i> , Berlin: de Gruyter
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i> , Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SP	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i> , Leiden: Brill
WCC	World Council of Churches

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Introduction

My intention in this book is to cross boundaries within the discipline of theology in a search for integration. The key topics of Christian doctrine are explored in a way neither simply dogmatic nor historical; rather this is a stab at a systematic theology which has contemporary coherence, but is informed, not by the usual dialogue with contemporary philosophers or theologians, but rather by engagement with the theology of the early church fathers who laid down the parameters of Christian theology and enshrined key concepts in the creeds.

Appropriation of theology from the past necessarily starts by adopting a historico-critical approach to reading extant work – it cannot simply be the exposition of tradition as if tradition could straightforwardly be adopted without question in a totally different intellectual context, as was recognized in Maurice Wiles' programme of 'doctrinal criticism'. On the other hand, we are ourselves constrained by our post-Enlightenment, post-modern mind-sets, and the possibility must be entertained that thinkers of the past might challenge the unquestioned assumptions which inform present conceptual frameworks. Being as true as possible to texts from the past, while also being true to ourselves, may be described as 'ethical reading'.¹ This requires balance between reception and distance, between critique and respect, acknowledging both kinship and otherness. In this respect the aim is a kind of ecumenism over

¹ See my articles, 'The Pastorals and the Ethics of Reading', *JSNT* 45 (1992), 105–20; 'Allegory and the Ethics of Reading' in Francis Watson (ed.), *The Open Text* (London: SPCK, 1993), pp. 103–20.

time, a respectful listening to the theological commitments of those with whom we share an identifiably common faith but in very different circumstances.

To make sense of things means being coherent in our terms, while letting perspectives from other worlds contribute, as they prove to ring true or provide maps and guides which clearly cover the same terrain, even if out of date. What I offer, then, is a conversation in which the interests and anxieties of myself and my contemporaries influence the selection and reading of past texts, yet allow sometimes strange ideas to contribute to shaping our own understanding. So I endeavour to expound patristic theological argument and insights with empathy and sensitivity to context, then to explore how this material might contribute to constructing a theological position which is tenable by someone like myself in the circumstances of today. Two points inform this undertaking:

- Texts (whether classical or canonical) potentially have a future, and may become transformative.
- Theology is an exploratory rather than an explanatory discipline – ‘faith seeking understanding’.

Though largely shaped as hermeneutical engagement with the intellectual, moral and spiritual reasoning of the fathers, this study bears testimony to a theological journey through modernity and post-modernity. The struggle with modernity shaped the minds of my generation, which has then been faced with the questions of post-modernity – the breakdown of a common rationality in the face of pluralism, the cry for justice in the midst of an unjust century. We cannot avoid the challenges of racism, religious traditions other than Christianity, feminism and disability issues, any more than previously the challenge of science, psychology and sociology. We occupy a particular place in the history of thought and culture. Yet the principal focus of my scholarship has been texts from a different world, a pre-modern world where such matters were never considered. So, my aim is integrity and integration, a systematic

theology of an unusual kind, covering the standard *topoi* but not in a standard way, and embracing other aspects of my experience too:

- ecclesial life: the search for an understanding of theology that can affirm and celebrate different histories, relationships and identities, including the ministry of women, within an ecumenical horizon
- public life: the search for an understanding of Christian theology which is robust enough to discern the presence of God in a post-Christian, pluralist society, within a globalized world dominated by science and technology, and on a planet subject to humanly induced climate change
- personal life: from long, and sometimes desperate, searching for answers to the discovery that questions of theodicy cease to engage as over forty years of caring for a profoundly disabled son gives privileged access to the deepest truths of the Christian religion.

As a systematic theologian I need to make sense of all my experience. If that seems ambitious, my only response can be affirmation of the amazing journey made through the months of pulling together the material presented here. It has indeed been an experience of integration for which I am heartily grateful.

Integration also involves, in my case, daring to include writing in less academically conventional registers. To describe theology as second-order discourse is to fix it in a critical and reflective mode foreign to the ethos of patristic theology, which was never divorced from prayer and the life of the church. So, a prelude to each chapter offers a collection of snapshots whose purpose is to earth the topic in the everydayness of language and living; and two other genres appear, both of which I would defend as creating discourse more directly appropriate to theology than propositions philosophical or historico-critical:

- (1) A postlude to each chapter offers some of my own poetry. Poetry is surely not 'second-order' reflection on discrete

primary experience. Rather, in the gift of images, symbols and other figures of speech, along with the constraints of form, a kind of creative spirit enables the generation of elusive yet direct insight (or *theōria*) into truths that transcend logocentric rationality.² Language is necessarily the medium of theology, but theology can never be reduced to language – appropriate language always points beyond itself. In the mid-twentieth century, when linguistic philosophy dominated the intellectual scene, the status of religious language was a key issue. But the fact that religious language does not straightforwardly work in the same way as everyday, or even scientific, language was well recognized already by the church fathers, who knew that languages are multiple and translation from one language to another is indicative of its accidental rather than essential relationship with the things to which it refers. Trained in rhetoric, they knew that, even in the same language, the same thing can be said in many different ways, that language constantly points beyond itself and that language is inadequate to theological task.³ Ephrem the Syrian discerned a parallelism ‘between God’s two incarnations, first into human language when “He put on names” in Scripture, and then the Incarnation proper’;⁴ since God was incarnate, or rather inscribed, in words – in types and symbols and metaphors which point beyond themselves, he found poetry the most satisfactory medium for his theology. Ephrem’s precedent justifies the poetic postludes.

- (2) But the primary genre of theological discourse must be preaching. Surely it is no accident that so much extant patristic material is in the form of sermon or homily; furthermore, theological affirmation in the context of liturgy is surely performative, and not merely descriptive, reflective or second order. Accordingly,

² See Chapters 4 and 6. ³ See Chapter 8.

⁴ Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Rome: CIIS, 1985, republished Cistercian Publications, 1992), p. 32.