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Reframing the Nicaean creed
Toward a theological quantum leap of "imaging God": From zombie categories (the ontological-imperial God of "Condensed milk imaging") to bowel categories (the misericordia vulnerable God of "Intestine thinking")

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Abstract

It is hypothesised that the Nicaean Creed in its conceptualisation of "God" is paradigmatically framed and determined by the Emperor Mystique (Caesar cult). Thus, the impact of Constantine's imperialism, as well as Hellenistic Neoplatonism, in the formulation of the creed. Due to a lack of theological grammar at that time, the rather metaphysical allure of conceptualisation in the 4th century BC, specifically around 316–315 BC, put a rather radical challenge to the theological reframing of the specific God-image projected by the creed. Instead of the emphasis on the what of "God" (substance and essence of God – being characteristics), the article explores the paradigm shift from a metaphysical "definition" to the grassroots "infinition" of God (the how of "God"). Instead of "condensed-milk-thinking" (to reduce the divine dynamic to a definable Monophysitism of substantial oneness – ontological monadology), the divine complexity in Hebrew thinking and verbing terminology of El Shadday-terminology is proposed.

Introductory note

This year (2025), it will be 1,700 years since the Council of Nicaea was constituted under the chairmanship of the Emperor Constantine. Immediately, the question surfaces: How valid is the wording and God-images presented by the creed for human beings facing cloud computing, surfing cyberspatiality, and reasoning in metaverse terminology? For people thinking in terms of relativity and digital networking?

Already Tertullian (the first theologian to write in Latin, and so has been called "the father of Latin Christianity", as well as "the founder of Western theology)", posed the challenging question: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy [the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics] with the church?" (González 2007:53).

The question regarding the Academy immediately reveals the dilemma of processes of theologising in a more systematised way. In fact, to my mind, there exists no normative set of paradigms that could prescribe the language of creeds and confessions of faith. All forms of systematised theology (knowledge about "God" – church dogma) are embedded in cultural contexts and dependent on dominating life views and existing human vocabularies to express the Christian faith in meaningful terminology while interpreting the biblical narratives and history of Christian reflection. Our dilemma in a hermeneutical approach is that theology is necessarily a radical intellectual risk and, due to relativity, a "human mistake". There is no right or wrong theological system. Merely appropriate and inappropriate forms of biblical hermeneutics, trying to imagine or portray "God" by means of anthropomorphic speech and iconic depictions.[1] Thus, the reason why categories to translate the narratives of the Bible are ion fact, culturally embedded. They do not pretend to define the term "God" in abstract, substantial and ontological categories. They

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1   Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities. It is considered to be an innate tendency of human psychology. Personification is the related attribution of human form and characteristics to abstract concepts such as deities and supernatural forces. It's a common literary device and an accommodating form of human speech used to make characters and stories more relatable and engaging. Essentially, it's when we talk about something non-human as if it were human (See: Anthropomorphisms. Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropomorphism. [Accessed: 18 July 2025].

make use of symbols and metaphors to guide believers in their quest for meaning in life, making people aware of the faithfulness of "God" and the relevancy of divine comfort as described in both the Old and New Testaments. Comfort is then about "the courage to be" and faithful hoping.

Imaging God: Probing the numinous and invisible factor in life

Rudolph Otto (1923) describes contact with the holy as the numinous factor in our being human and spiritual quest for meaning, our yearning for a sense of purposefulness. The numinous represents awe, wonder and the quest for spiritual intimacy and a meta-mystique (*désir métaphysique*)[2]. It refers inter alia to the invisible dimension of transcendence.

According to Weima (1988:109), experiences of the numinous entail the following mystical dimensions:

- The *tremendum*. An experience of awe in fear and trembling. This fear is different from psychopathology or irrational forms of anxiety. It implies a respect for the impact and immediate presence of a kind of Transcendent Otherness.

- The *majestus*. A religious awareness of a kind of supreme being experienced as a form of superb and splendid grandeur (otherness), implying a superior power within the sphere of *meta*-thinking.

In general, the concept of imaging God is surrounded and encompassed by an allure of mystical imagination. It is an attempt to portray, depict or represent the invisible in terms of daily images, personified descriptions, well-known symbols and iconic metaphors. In her book *Ikonographie und Ikonologie*, Gabriele Kopp-Schmidt (2004:68-69) argues that icons and symbols were used to claim a kind of unique authority (superiority) ascribed to deities. She also points out that it was during the fourth century AD that the Christianization of Roman culture occurred. The Roman Christians made use of examples from ancient Rome in their depiction of Christ and in their church architecture.

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2   Emmanuel Levinas (1987:31) calls this longing for inter-collective communication and the existential desires for closeness, intimacy and a lasting sense of belongingness, *désir métaphysique*.

The emperor Constantine and his family supported the "new movement". When Christianity became a state religion at the end of the fourth century AD, elements of the Caesar-cult were accommodated in the liturgy and priesthood. Due to the institutional attempt to gain and maintain power, the clergy tried to project a powerful deity by portraying and depicting Christ in all images as a heavenly ruler and monarch because worshipping an invisible "God" was, in terms of the Roman Caesar cult, sheer nonsense[3].

Even though early Christians refused to worship the emperor or any other creature, "… they were loyal subjects of the empire" (González 2007:57. In this regard, the impact of Constantine and his conversion to Christianity could be described as the most influential factor on systematic and confessional thinking.[4] In fact: "That impact was such that it has even been suggested that until the twentieth century the church lived in its "Constantinian era", and that we are now going through a crisis connected with the end of that long era" (González 2007:113)[5].

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3   Christianity was often rendered by the Romans as a 'religion of barbarians. "They [the Christians] claim on the one hand that God is omnipotent, high above every creature. But on the other hand, they depict God as a busybody who is constantly delving into human affairs, who goes into every home listening to what is said and even checking what is cooked. This is sheer contradiction and nonsense" (González 2007:51). For that matter, 'imaging God' was impossible without falling back on existing cultural and religious images within the subconscious mindset of early Christianity. The Christianization of life in Rome was, thus, influenced indirectly (or even directly) by the converted quest for absolute power and the restoration of the ancient glory of the Roman empire (González 2007:118). A kind of syncretistic Christianity (the idol of a monumental city – the Constantinople-image; Constantianism) developed alongside attempts to become an influential power in civil life.

4   "But Constantine ascribed his victorious Imperial campaign to the protection of the Christian God and began to offer safety and privilege to Christians and their leaders. It was Constantine who called the Council of Nicaea, wanting to assert his own authority but also wanting this nascent 'institutional' Church to get a grip and unite behind him. Suddenly, Christians had a chance to shape the world, to shape culture, from the top down as well as from the bottom up" (Zahnd, Brian. April 29th, 2017).

5   The Nicaean council came up with the first version of the Creed. It is reported that lots of people don't know the Creed at all, or, if they do, they value it as dogmatic, exclusionary and couched in the arcane language of fourth century classical philosophy. It is against this cultural and imperial background that the emperor Constantine played a pivotal role in detecting the paradigmatic tone of the Nicaean council. Roman emperors had always been religious leaders and opted as kind of architects for the socialising and civilising of possible God-images . (Christianity in the 4th century. Wikipedia).

To communicate their faith amid a Hellenistic culture, Christians found two philosophical traditions particularly attractive and helpful: Platonism (the notion of a supreme being, perfect and immutable) and Stoicism (passions should subside and reason prevails – the ideal of *apatheia*) (Gonzáles 2007:16–17). Due to this cultural, religious, philosophical and paradigmatic background, all kinds of syncretisms played a pivotal role in what can be called the paradigmatic setting for the writing of the Nicaean Creed.

Figure 1. Left. Constantine is also known as the originator of the religiopolitical ideology known as Constantianism, which epitomises the unity of church and state, as opposed to the separation of church and state. He founded the city of Constantinople and made it the capital of the Empire, which remained so for over a millennium. (Online: https://pdsh.fandom.com/wiki/Constantine_the_Great. Accessed 17 June 2025). (public domain).

Figure 2. Right. Icon depicting Emperor Constantine, centre, accompanied by the Church Fathers of the 325 First Council of Nicaea, holding the Nicene Creed in its 381 formats. (Nicene creed. Wikipedia. Online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed. Accessed 17 June 2025).

The third and fourth centuries AD could be described as the urgent quest for appropriate theological grammar that can establish the Christian faith as a civil and religious alternative to what can be called the imperial myth of the "Emperor Mystique" (Mathews 1993:12).

The Emperor Mystique: Religious incompetence captured by the war of images

What we should accept is the fact that within early Christian iconography, wording and verbing God, took place in what could be called a "war of images" (Mathews 1993: 4). Mathews contends that the lanky Good Shepherd of early Christian art wrestled with the muscular image of Hercules and won (1993: 8). However, at stake for our research, is still the question posed by Mathews: "If Christ is not the emperor, who is he?" (1993:21). If the power of the Christian God is not latent imperial authority, what is it? "The question of power is critical during this war of images" (Mathews 1993: 21).

The "Emperor Mystique" approach refers to the theory in iconography accepted by art historians, namely that the images of Christ in Early Christian imagery were derived from images of the Roman emperor.

> Both the shape and the power of the images, according to this theory, come from reliance on imagery formerly used to present the emperor. I call this approach the "Emperor Mystique". It is a "mystique" insofar as it involves a reverence bordering on cult for everything belonging to the emperor. To such historians, dropping the word "imperial" into a discussion represents an appeal to a kind of ultimate value beyond which one never looks (Mathews 1993:12).

"Finding themselves with an emperor of their own faith, Christians boldly appropriated for their own religious purposes the entire vocabulary of imperial art, transforming motifs and compositions that had been used for imperial propaganda into propaganda for Christ" (Mathews 1993:13). Inevitably, the future of Christian iconography was profoundly modified. One can say that all the vocabulary of a triumphal or imperial iconographic language was poured into the paradigms and the dictionary which served

Christian iconography, until then limited and poorly adapted to treat abstract ideas (Mathews 1993: 13).

In her book on a new way of seeing the Roman Empire (*Emperor of Rome: Ruling the Ancient Roman World*, 2023), Mary Beard points to imperialistic processes mentioned by Seneca by which some Roman emperors were proclaimed as gods or goddesses. It was called the deification (*consecratio* in Latin) (Beard 2023:380)[6]. Inevitably, the same influential factor infiltrated theologising in Christian circles.

Figure 3. Antoninus Pius and his wife Faustina are portrayed in the process of deification after their death, travelling together to heaven. The imperial couple is being conveyed heavenward by a male figure that is youthful and almost entirely nude. The legendary Roman eagle, hovering over the victorious legions. Signified as symbol, the power and majesty of Rome, the Eternal City. (The Column of Anthonius Pius. 2016. GJCL Classical Art History. [Online]. Available: https://gjclarthistory.blogspot.com/2016/04/the-column-of-antoninus-pius.html. [Accessed: 6 February 2025].

6　The fact is that religion was an important part of being an emperor, and of the imperial image (Beard 2023:372). Dead emperors could be turned into immortal gods by the vote of the senate. "For while divus was the usual term for a 'promoted emperor', deus was the term for a traditional god. The rules were not absolutely hard and fast (Vespasian's deathbed phrase was actually "I think I am becoming deus"). But that difference between divus and deus suggests that divine emperors were not so much gods, as godlike" (Beard 2023:390).

The *Pantokrator*-image: The imperial, all-powerful threat of omni-categories (the threat of substantiation and imperialism)

In the history of art and Christian iconography, imaging the Godhead (framed by imperial images) became very prescriptive. Very specifically, when the image should protect the power and authority of divinity: God as *Pantokratōr* (the omnipotence of God). In this respect, cultural images, stemming from the Roman and Egyptian cultures, play a pivotal role. (Nyssen 1982:413).

Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine (c. 260–c. 340) started to formulate for the emperor a Christian theory of divine kingship that connected a close association between the lordship of Christ and the emperor's governance of the Roman Empire. Eusebius called the emperor vicegerent of Christ, an apostle for the secular sector. "Imperial overtones in representations of Christ, then, would harmonise neatly with the philosophical theory of the emperor's divine rule" (Mathews 1993: 14).

When the Bible was translated into Greek, the concept of God-*Pantocrator* was used to depict an all-powerful Christian God. The Latin omnipotence carried the ideology of imperial power into the formulation of the early church. It even seemed as if "God" should play the role of a kind of Platonic demiurge.[7]

An excellent example of our theological predicament of interpreting "Divine Otherness" (the *meta*-dimension of faith), is how the complexity of the Hebrew concept of *El Shadday* was translated into Greek. The rather imperialistic and all-powerful category of *pantokratōr* had been used to communicate divine sole power over against the imperialistic force of other deities, monarchs and Caesars. The Greek word *pantokratōr* (παντοκράτωρ) means "almighty" or "all-powerful". It is made up of the Greek words *pantos* ("all") and *kratos* ("strength", "might", "power"). Instead of describing the

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7   The demiurge is the dualistic, cruel god of battles and bloody sacrifices, who created the world, then later this demiurge sent his son, the logos, who was the good god. (See Egbert, Christine. 2011:1). (Greek Versus Hebrew Mindset: Worship, Spirituality, Salvation, and Prayer. [Online]. Available: https://vineyardjc.com/greek-versus-hebrew-mindset/. [Accessed: 8 February 2025].

unique and splendid way in which Yahweh cared for his people (*xáris*),[8] the theological discussion derailed into the direction of an all-powerful deity competition: Whose "God" is the most dominant, strongest, autocratic and imperialistic deity that should be worshipped based on sheer subjugation.

Figure 4. In Christian iconography, Christ Pantocrator/pantokratōr (Ancient Greek: Χριστὸς Παντοκράτωρ, lit. "Christ the Almighty") is a specific depiction of Christ. Pantocrator/Pantokratōr, literally ruler of all, but usually translated as "Almighty" or "all-powerful". The Pantocrator is largely an Eastern Orthodox or Eastern Catholic theological concept and is less common under that name in Latin Catholicism. In the West, the equivalent image in art is known as Christ in Majesty. (Christ Pantocrator. Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Pantocrator. [Accessed: 16 February 2025].

Even the church was described as the court and throne of the heavenly king (Cathedral from cathedra= throne) and his representative and successor, the bishop, not to be outshone by secular pomp, practised a clerical pomp of his own. The "Emperor Mystique" had an important theatrical dimension. It shaped the hierarchy of officials, as well. The church designed its own elaborate processions, receptions, its ritual chants, hymns, sermons, attire and insignia.

What becomes clear is that early iconography and religious conceptualisations were embedded in what historians called "Late Antique". "The concept describes the history of Mediterranean lands from the third to the seventh century. "Late Antique" emphasises the strong

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8   The Greek word χάρις (*xáris*), often transliterated as *charis*, means grace, favour, or kindness. It can also refer to a gift or benefit, expressions of kindness, or even beauty and charm. In the New Testament, it is frequently used to describe God's unearned favour and blessing.

lines of continuity in patterns of government, in social structures, and in culture that tie this period to the preceding age of Imperial Rome" (Mathews 1993:11).

The Constantinian impact on defining the Godhead led, furthermore, to attempts to substantiate God-images in terms of ontic categories stemming from Greek philosophy.

The key battle in the formulation of a creed was to maintain the notion of an All-mighty Divinity (omnipotent, pantokrator-like) and to shield theistic interpretations from sheer heresy. The Christian deity should be the sole Ruler of the cosmos and, therefore, also be monophyletic, i.e., a substance with one origin (being the same). In fact, being Monophysite (a nature and ontic essence staying the same even under different circumstances) projected the notion of an impassible deity.

My hunch is that, when reading and scrutinising the text of the creed, the impression develops that the creed focuses more on the ontic question of defining God (essence) (what?) than on the pastoral and meaning question (*telos*) of comfort (how?). Eventually, in orthodoxy and dogmatics, imaging God points rather to the substantial and metaphysical question regarding the what of matter (essence of being/ *homoousia*) than the more caring question regarding the how and meaning of matter (the *teleios* / destiny of life and being).

Figure 5. The impossibility to can God into a fixed dogmatic definition regarding the essence, substance and characteristics of an impassable God.

The 55 years of Controversy after the Nicene Creed of 325 revolved specifically around the word homoousios. Since, in the Nicene Creed, this term was an interpretation of the term "begotten," the differences between the various Christological views are essentially different interpretations of the terms "Father," "Son," and "only begotten." These interpretations result in different views with respect to the substance of the Son, based on which the five views may be summarised: Sabellianism = One and the same substance; Homoousian = Distinct but identical substance; Homoiousian = Similar in substance; Neo-Arianism or heteroousians = unlike in substance; Homoianism refuses to refer to substance (Homoiousian. Wikipedia).

Suddenly, in postmodernity, the paradigms of continuity, harmony and imperial totalitarianism, of metaphysical absolutes and a mechanistic, Newtonian worldview, are fading away, making room for relativity, complexity and the domain of unpredicted probabilities (Taleb 2010). Gradually, the worldview of paradox and disorder, the worldview of chaosmos, is shaping paradigmatic thinking. The Monophysite debate shifted from synchronisation of divine sameness (substantiation) to the complexification of a divine *Parakletos* (*parakalein*)[9].

The new challenge: From mechanistic thinking to chaosmos thinking – the complexification of life.

The articulation of complexity points to a radical new way of thinking in theory formation called chaosmos thinking (Morin 1992:53). The word is a combination of the Greek words χάος and κόσμος. In short, the

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9   *"Parakaleo"* (παρακαλέω) is a Greek word with a rich range of meanings, primarily related to calling, encouraging, and comforting. It encompasses the act of summoning, exhorting, appealing to, and providing solace or support. "In the New Testament, the word most often translated as "encouragement" is *"parakalein"*. This term comes from two Greek words: "para" meaning 'alongside of' and "kaleo" meaning "to call". A parakletos is, therefore, an Encourager, one who puts courage into the fainthearted, strength into the weak, life into the downtrodden, confidence into the insecure, and steadfastness into every warrior in the face of great trial" (*Parakalein*. Pure Encouragements. [Online]. Available: https://www.pureencouragement.org/about-us#:~:text=In%20the%20New%20Testament%2C%20the,the%20weak%2C%20life%20into%20the. [Accessed: 25 July 2025].

relationship between order and chaos is a continuous process that makes up the weave of immanence and, thus, crafts relativity to be determined by disjunction rather than by final, coherent systems. Rather than being analytic and reductionist within the split between subject and object, it calculates with the indeterminant factor within the happenstances of life (Davies in Montuori 2008: xxix).

One can call this new paradigm "the indeterminate or unpredictable physics of hope". The cosmos is not constructed by necessity and reductionist determinism, but rather it is partly a chaosmos, constructed by order as well as disorder (Montuori 2008: xxxiii). Rather than an either/or method, or an even /and approach, complexity becomes the method of generativity, explosive change and creativity at once. Complexity describes a happenstance wherein order –disorder is about a complex system of interacting relationships pointing to paradox rather than to orthodox (a belief or position generally accepted as correct and logically acceptable).

I need to turn to the following burning theological question: What is the implication of shifting from Constantinople thinking to the complexity of chaosmos thinking on creeds, confessions and attempts to image God in Christian theology?

From Platonic demiurge to Hebrew El Shadday: The complexity of conceptualising divine countenance (visage) within the realm of human grassroots experiences

While the Old Testament has a wide variety of names and epithets that refer to God in Hebrew, the Greek text of the New Testament uses far fewer variants. The essential uses of the name of God (often referred to as Father) in the New Testament are Theos (θεός, the Greek term for God), or sometimes Kyrios (i.e. Lord in Greek). The notion of divinity became closely related to the notion of "Emmanuel"[10] and its connection to the faithfulness of

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10   Emmanuel, which appears in Matthew 1:23, possibly refers to Isaiah 7:14, and does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament, but in the context of Matthew 28:20 ("I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"), indicates that Jesus as Messiah will be with the faithful to the end of the age, representing a mysterious form of divine presencing.

Yahweh and divine promises regarding care and compassionate being-with is determined by divine grace and compassion (ḥēsēd, rēchēm).

The concept of *Theos* (God) is indeed multidimensional and is operationalised in different, very challenging contexts. (See, for example, Ezekiel 36:23). The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible reveals YHWH (often vocalised with vowels as "Yahweh" or "Jehovah") as the very distinctive name of God, along with certain titles including *El Elyon* and *El Shaddai*. *Jah* or *Yah* (Hebrew:יָהּ , *Yāh*[11]) is a short form of the tetragrammaton יהוה (YHWH). YHWH became the unique name of God: Yahweh, which the ancient Israelites used during their wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt[12].

Figure 6. The Tetragrammaton, inscribed on the page of a Sephardic manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, The Tetragrammaton, inscribed on the page of a Sephardic manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, 1385. (Yahweh. Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yahweh. [Accessed: 16 February 2025].

11 At Revelation 19:1–6, Jah is embedded in the phrase "hallelujah" (Tiberian *hăyûləllah*), a Hebrew expression that literally means "Praise Jah".

12 In later centuries, El and Yahweh became conflated, and El-linked epithets, such as ʾĒl Šadday (יִדַּשׁ לֹא), were used. It came to be applied exclusively to Yahweh alone. The pronunciation of YHWH in the Old Testament can never be certain, given that the original Hebrew text only used consonants and is closely related to a verb *hjh*. The English form Jehovah (הְוָֹהי, Yəhōwā) was formed during the Middle Ages by combining the Latinization of the four consonants YHWH with the vowel points that Masoretes used to indicate that the reader should say Adonai when YHWH was encountered. (See: Names of God in Christianity. Wikipedia).

Rather than applying the speculative term of *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιον)[13] to the what of God, the verbing of God (the how of God; Hebrew: יָהּ, Yāh) projects a more compassionate and caring image regarding the complexity of the Godhead within the different Biblical narratives about the engagement of God with the human quest for meaning and comfort in suffering – the caring and hospitable God - than to condense God into speculative ontic categories.

The point is: To condense divinity to a kind of fixed unit and artificial form of ontic oneness, which led to the speculative controversy of "Monophysitism".

Applying the theological doctrine of Monophysitism to imaging "God" points to the following:

> The word "Monophysite" did not come into use until after the Council of Nicaea[14] in 325, as many scholars continuously discussed Christian doctrine. This resulted in later councils needing to deal with other heresies that failed to understand the nature of Christ. This was true at the Council of Constantinople in 381, which rejected Apollinarism, the idea that Jesus had some human and

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13   Rowan Williams described it as "the radical words of Nicaea" and a "conceptual innovation". The Arians objected that these words are both "unscriptural" and "untraditional". In contrast to these "radical words", Williams refers to "the lost innocence of pre-Nicene trinitarian language". (Rowan Williams – Arius, Heresy & Tradition, 2001).

14   The First Council of Nicaea, held in 325 AD, was convened by Emperor Constantine I to address the Arian controversy, and while he presided over the opening session and participated in the discussions, it's believed that Hosius of Corduba (also known as Osius) likely presided over the council's debates and proceedings as Constantine's representative. The major impetus for the calling of the Council of Nicaea arose in a theological dispute among the Christian clergy of Alexandria concerning the nature of Jesus, his origin, and relation to God the Father. Scholars propose dates between 318 and 322 for the beginning of the dispute. The precise origins of the controversy are unclear, but the principal actors were Archbishop Alexander of Alexandria and the presbyter Arius. Arius' teachings are known partially from a few pieces of his writing which survive, but principally from his opponents, primarily Alexander and Athanasius of Alexandria. Arius criticised Alexander's teachings on Christology; Alexander taught that Jesus, as God the Son, was eternally generated from the Father, while Arius and his followers asserted that the Father alone was eternal, and that the Son was created or begotten by the Father, and thus had a defined point of origin and was subordinate to the Father (First Council of Nicaea. Wikipedia. [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Council_of_Nicaea. [Accessed: 18 March 2025].

divine parts mixed into one person. This was an attempt to unify the natures of Christ, but the doctrine described Jesus' natures as incomplete (Spaulding, William. 2023. Monophysitism History, Doctrines & Legacy. Study.com).

Naming "God": impossible complexity

Complexity refers to the seemingly paradoxical attempts to name "God". Is "God" merely a Creator, Father, a Warrior, Imperial King, Punitive Judge, Vicious Tyrant or Caring Shepherd, even a Suffering Servant?

Naming "God" is a never-ending human hermeneutic endeavour, exposed necessarily to one-sidedness and relativity. The reason for that is that the meaning of a God-image is always embedded in the cultural context of the Biblical narrative (the grassroots experience of the Exodus tradition and the tragedy of a Golgotha misery). The naming of God attains even a radical new meaning in the Christ-event of incarnation, salvation, crucifixion and resurrection. The New Testament opens new vistas regarding the countenance, visage of Yahweh within the cruel, inhumane Golgotha-grassroots event outside the bastion of Jerusalem, the so-called "Holy City of Peace".

Being aware of complexity and relativity, I struggled in the eighties to name "God". As a white male, belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church, I had no legitimacy in a post-apartheid dispensation. My desperate incompetence forced me to turn to iconography portraying the divine event of incarnation within the context of a poor township at the skirts of Cape Town, called Crossroads.

Figure 7. Cape Flats, Cape Town, by D.J. Louw. The countenance of God[15] within the complexity of grassroots contexts determined by the ugly space of xenophobia, dereliction and anxiety due to the impact of the inhumane ideology implemented by apartheid policy. Wire always segregated poor townships and black settlements from the posh white residential areas. The shacks built from corrugated iron are depicted as faces, indicating that they are not merely poor structures but homes to basically displaced and homeless people, framing the quest for belongingness. The holy irony in this painting is that the imperialism of a Roman Caesar-like soldier (centurion) made a profound theological (one can call it a Theopaschite) statement: This spectacle of injustice reveals the image of divinity: Matthew 27:54: "Now when the centurion, and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'"

It was my sheer intention and hope that the icon of a grassroots and Township God-image could help people to shift from a brutal apartheid ideology to a compassionate, transforming praxis approach in theologising. Instead of formulating "God" in a creed, it becomes my contention to start reflecting on a "presencing God" within the terminology of a cruciform *praxis pietatis* of worshipping God in "Township life". Theologically, the paradigm shift implies the following: From institutionalising an

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15 Countenance is another word for face or, more specifically, visage, meaning facial expression. It is the expression appearing on the face of the Lord as He looks upon His people. The phrase is most well-known for its use in Aaron's blessing, also called the Aaronic Blessing, in Numbers 6:24–26.

omnipotent, impassible God (prescriptive definition – substantiation) to verbalising a compassionate, co-suffering, verbing God (to-be-with; demonstrating divine *infinitions*).

Worshipping God rather than naming God

Christine Egbert (2011:1) refers to the scholarly work of Brad Scott titled *Let This Mind Be In You*. Scott wrote: "In Hebrew culture, the word *avodah* is understood as service, worship, or servitude. The temple service was called avodah. False worship was known as *avodah zerah*. A servant of God was a worshiper of God, and worship is a continuous act."

Hebrews, therefore, viewed worship as a never-ending, continuous mode of "to be". Worship was a continuous act of living the covenantal faith (mode and how of life). Everything you did – whether farming, going to war, making bread, taking care of a husband, wife, or child, and especially the study of God's word – was worship. The Hebrew mindset does not separate ordinary, daily activity from religious duties. Verbing of life, as an act of "to be", was in fact an act of spiritual worship.

Toward the quantum leap in Christian theology: From *Pantokrator* veneration (impassibility) to Theopaschite foolishness (*astheneia*)
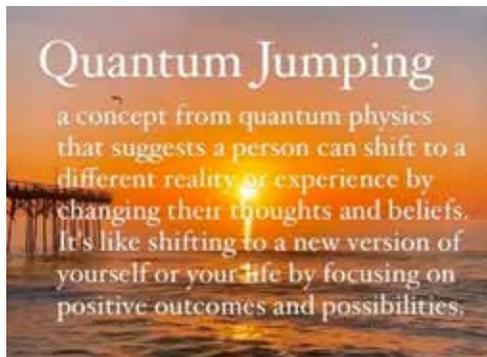

Figure 8. Quantum jumping implies taking the risk of a failure but trusting the outcome of radical new perspectives that can reframe outdated, zombie categories in theological thinking and open new vistas for faithful hoping. (Quantum Leap. Online 2025)

In science, or physics, a quantum leap occurs when the electron of an atom "jumps" from one energy level to another so rapidly that it seems discontinuous. A quantum leap in spirituality refers to a sudden, profound transformation in one's mindset. In religious thinking, a quantum leap refers from "proofing God", to "living God"; from "defining God" (God exists), to professing God (God cares). It is about letting go of "zombie categories" (letting go of old, rather outdated patterns of thinking – the wear and tear of outdated terminology) (Reader 2008) while probing more "appropriate, functional categories" (the challenge of reframing and reformulating and reforming fixed, dysfunctional mindsets).

What is the implication of networking thinking on the dynamics of imaging God in pastoral and practical theology?

Theological proposition: From "zombie categories" (*homoousian*) to "bowel" categories (*derelictio*)

Homoousios-thinking in processes of imaging God, focuses on the rather metaphysical and theological riddle of divine sameness and substantial identity of the Godhead as confessed in ecclesial creeds and doctrinal statements.

In Jesus' cross and resurrection, the German theologian Moltmann discovers the how of God (Moltmann 1972:144). God is the God in action, in the crucifixion. He is the God of passion. The latter is not a static God, but a dynamic God, who is actively involved in the God-forsaken cry of Christ on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus' cry from the cross (*derelictio*) outlines a Trinitarian theology of the cross. This cry defines God's "how?" in suffering. (See Louw 2000 for an in-depth discussion on Theopaschite thinking).

The value of Theopaschite theology resides in the fact that it indicates how God, through the suffering of the Son, identified Himself with the suffering of humankind. In this, Moltmann shares the views of Barth, Küng, Mühlen and Kitamori, known as Theopaschite Theology.

Rather than using "zombie categories" (Reader (2008:1)[16] to deal with the hermeneutic complexity of the character of divinity, I would suggest a paradigm shift from *the Platonic homousian-metaphysical spectacle* (defining the being of the Godhead) to the *Hebrew verbing and journeying during the Exodus-struggle* (verbing categories to highlight different stations in the history of covenantal being-with the people of Yahweh). The paradigm shift points in the direction of rather "foolish" categories as operated by Theopaschite thinking: *the weakness of God* (Divine *Astheneia*). From the *Pantocrator* categories[17] of God All-mighty (authoritative, imperialistic) to the *El Shaddai* categories of divine intestines (compassionate, caring and being there where they are).

Hall (1993:133) asserts that one of the most repressing God-images of Christian theism and cultural Christian imperialism was "The Father Almighty" – an image which was misused in the North American continent to insulate people from the reality of their situation. Such a theology, he argues, constitutes part of the repressive mechanisms of a class that can still camouflage the truth because it is well padded economically and physically; and that this theology, accordingly, is partly responsible for the oppression of others who suffer from First World luxury, aggressiveness, and self-deceit (Hall 1993:133). Hall (1993:134) calls such a theology that maintains the image of deity, based on a power principle that can only comfort the comfortable, "a flagrantly disobedient theology". Indeed, God comforts the afflicted but also afflicts the comfortable.

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16 In his book on *Reconstructing Practical Theology*, Reader (2008:1) warns against the danger of "zombie categories" (Ulrich Beck), i.e. the continued employment of concepts that no longer do justice to the world we experience, and yet, which are difficult to abandon because of tradition and because they are not yet totally redundant. Zombie categories are therefore described as the "living dead", the tried and familiar frameworks of interpretation that have served us well for many years and continue to haunt our thoughts and analyses, even though they are embedded in a world that is passing away before our eyes.

17 "God's love for me was limited by my fear of God's power, and it seemed wise to keep a careful distance even though the desire for closeness was immense. I know that I share this experience with countless others. I have seen how the fear of becoming subject to God's revenge and punishment has paralysed the mental and emotional lives of many people, independently of their age, religion, or lifestyle. This paralysing fear of God is one of the great human tragedies" (Nouwen 1994:121).

Passio Dei: From the imperialism of threat power ("The Father All-powerful") to the compassion of vulnerable power (*splanchnizomai*) ("The Father-like Peristalsis")

The whole framework of the messianic expectation and hope in the New Testament is determined by passion. In the account of Christ's narrative of suffering, *paschō* demarcates the identity of Christ's mediatorial work and the connection with death: *pathēma tou thanatou* (Heb 2:9). *Paschō* is closely connected to soteriology. It is substitutionary in character because Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (Heb 13:12). The suffering of Christ, as displayed in a theology of the cross, describes the all-sufficiency and completeness of his atoning sacrifice. His vicarious suffering took place *ephapax*, once for all (Heb 7:27; 9:12; Rom 6:10) (Gärtner 1971:723). Christ's vicarious suffering means for believers not deliverance from earthly suffering, but deliverance from earthly suffering (Gärtner 1978:724).

Instead of the impassibility of God and our human tendency of apatheia, compassion summons us to a lifestyle of hospitable being-with and suffering-with the other. "God is *polusplanchnos*, and by becoming compassion in the flesh (the incarnate paradigm), God has summoned his people likewise to become compassion within the community of the church, whose mutuality re-enacts, through participation, the original mutuality of Father, Son and Spirit" (Davies 2001:249).

Fretheim's conclusion (1984:106) is quite remarkable: "For, even in those instances where the vestments of God's appearance are threaded with lineaments of power, they clothe in vulnerable form. There is no such thing for Israel as a "non-incarnate God.""

The suffering of God is not foreign to the Old Testament. According to Fretheim, God's suffering in the Old Testament is threefold. He suffers because the people rejected Him as Lord; He suffers with the people who are suffering; He suffers for them because in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, "God gives of himself to make forgiveness possible" (Fretheim 1984:139).

Toward a praxis theology of the intestines (divine bowel categories)

I contend that the *passio Dei* is a theological exposition of the praxis of hope in caregiving (divine praxeology). The *passio Dei*, in its connection to the praxis of God's vicarious how, defines "practice" in practical theology to compassion (*rḥm* in close connection to the root *ḥnn*, which means to be gracious). Together with *oiktirmos* and praxis, the *passio Dei* expresses the verbing quality of God as connected to human vulnerability and suffering (H-H. Esser 1976:598). The verb *splanchnizomai* is used to make the unbounded mercy of God visible and even audible. *Ta splanchna* reveals God as a Presence, "a Companion, "your God" (Hall 1993:147).

In general, the Greek concept of *to splanchnon* refers to the valuable parts, the heart, lung, the liver, but also the spleen and the kidneys. During the sacrifice, they are removed for the sacrificial meal. With reference to humans, *splanchna* refers to the human entrails, especially for the male sexual organs and the womb, as the site of the powers of conception and birth. Within metaphoric speech, *ta splanchna* expresses pity, compassion and love. "The oldest form of the verb is *splanchneuō*, eat the entrails, prophesy from the entrails" (H.-H. Esser 1976:599).

Figure 9. Left: Theology of the intestines – compassion as the moving of the bowels. (Human digestive system. [Online:]. Available: https://www.britannica.com/video/Most-process-intestine-system-channels-water-nutrients/-153041. [Accessed: 26 October 2024].

Figure 10. Right: See: Meaning *astheneia*. [Online]. Available: https://slideplayer.com/slide/10185901/. [Accessed: 16t October 2024].

Conclusion

The quantum leap into a theology of the intestines discovers divine peristalsis as the most powerful expression of the *rēchēm* and *ḥēsēd* of El Shadday.

In my quest for the middle C of Christian theology, the Theopaschite option of Pauline thinking, namely the "Weakness/*Astheneia* of God", is used as a theological point of departure. The intention was to develop a *theology of the intestines* wherein the notion of Divine Pity (*ḥēsēd* and *rēchēm*) is used to describe the how of the God indwelling and spiritual engagement with human suffering and vulnerability. In this regard, the verb *esplanchnizomai* describes the divine spectacle of a verbing Passio Dei; the perichoresis of a Triade[18] mode of *parakalein* (comfort). reshaping orthodox Triune thinking into the chaosmic paradox of Divine "presencing".

In this regard, the **Mother Theresa model** (Calcutta model) comes into play as an illustration of a grassroots creed, moulded by the public marketspace of sheer, inhumane poverty (bottom-up categories) instead of an institutional clerical creed (top-down approach).

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18   Three entities considered functionally as a unit within the dynamics of different perspectives to disclose a complexity of meaning with three dimensions like the three sides of a triangle. Thus, the notion of a Divine triad of different modes of engagement with the human predicament of vulnerability and suffering.

On being passionate in the turmoil and misery of desperate poverty. Saint Teresa of Calcutta (known as Mother Teresa) was an Albanian-born Indian Roman Catholic missionary and nun who devoted her life to helping those most in need. She founded the Missionaries of Charity in India in 1950, and for over 45 years, she ministered to the poor, sick, orphaned and dying. (St Mother Teresa of Calcutta – Feast Day – September 5, 2024. Online: https://catholicreadings.org/saint-mother-teresa-of-calcutta/. Accessed the 6th of March 2025). Mother Theresa founded the Missionaries of Charity (Van Lill 2008:744–745), and with her devotion to people in need, she changed her daily living space into a kind of hospice within the dreadful slums of Calcutta. Her pastoral caregiving was based on a very simple principle: To be there where people are, in solidarity with the poor and suffering human beings. With her vision of hope, she converted an abandoned Hindu temple into the Kalighat Home for the Dying, a free hospice for the poor.

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