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St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology
**Participation in the Christian
Doctrinal and Philosophical Tradition**

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First published: 9 May 2024

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Participation>

Citation

Davison, Andrew. 2024. 'Participation in the Christian Doctrinal and Philosophical Tradition', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Participation> Accessed: 6 April 2026

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ISSN 2753-3492

Participation in the Christian Doctrinal and Philosophical Tradition

Andrew Davison

'Participation' or 'partaking' has featured in Christian theology since the New Testament, describing a relation of derivation, likeness, or communion. Theologians including Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and Thomas Aquinas made this theme an important aspect of their work. In marked but more limited ways, participation was also important for Martin Luther, John Calvin, and later Protestant writers. With themes of sharing and reception from a transcendent source, Christian theologians have found common ground with Platonism. A wide range of topics in Christian theology have been explored in these terms. While each can be set out in relative isolation, participation lends itself to an integrative view. As the backbone for a scheme of theological metaphysics, participation has come to renewed prominence in the second half of the twentieth century. Today it offers an area of considerable shared interest, across ecclesial traditions.

Keywords: Christology, Creation, Eschatology, Evil, God, Metaphysics, Participation, Partaking, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Theological anthropology

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1 Introduction

Participation is a metaphysical and theological category characterized by sharing in or reception from another, foundationally in and from God. The principal Greek terms are *méthexis* and *koinonia*, and, in Latin, *participatio*.

Donation and reception, sharing and imitation are central to a wide range of theological traditions, not least Christianity. Various biblical texts trace created things back to God as the origin of being, character, goodness, and action, along with closely-associated ideas of union and communion, while redeemed human life is described as a participation ‘in Christ’ and ‘in the divine nature’ (for instance, 1 Chr 29:11–12; Isa 26:12; Acts 17:22–30; Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 4:7; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 2:20; Jas 1:17; 2 Pet 1:4; see also The Natures, Minds, and Wills of Christ in Christian Philosophy). Theologians have expressed these ideas in terms of participation. The theme is also prominent in eschatology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology.

Contemporary theological interest in participation is notable for its ecumenical breadth, bridging traditions. Lutherans and Eastern Orthodox theologians (notably in Finland), for instance, have found common ground in thinking about salvation as participation in God or *theosis*. Interest in Christian Platonism (in which participation is a central theme) spans Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and some traditions that were more antagonistic towards philosophy in the twentieth century, such as Reformed Protestantism. Monographs have explored participation as a theme in figures including Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Richard Hooker, and Charles Wesley (Balás 1966; Törönen 2007; Billings 2007; Tollefsen 2008; Vainio 2008; Spezzano 2015; Dominiak 2019; Davison 2019; Aspray 2021; Ge 2021; Kimbrough 2016). In this article, Aquinas will serve as a frequent reference, as he is the most influential figure in contemporary discussions of participation.

While the most typical formulation in contemporary English writing is ‘participation in’, the meaning would often be more clearly expressed using the prepositions ‘of’ or ‘from’, as with the more archaic English phrase ‘partakers of’.

2 Sources and history

Jacob Sherman (2008) has set out a ‘genealogy of participation’ in three stages. Plato bequeathed an interest primarily in participation of essence, with creatures receiving their natures as a participation in the eternal and archetypal Forms. Christian writers adapted and revised this, locating these archetypes in God’s mind rather than in a distinct eternal realm of Forms (with a parallel development among the philosophers known as ‘Middle Platonists’).

Sherman's second historical inflection in thinking about participation comes in the Middle Ages, particularly with Aquinas. The emphasis on imitation and derivation broadened to include reception of existence or (more properly) being. Not only 'what a being is' (its essence), but also 'why a being is', was seen as a partaking from God.

Finally, Sherman indicates a move, associated with the Renaissance and developed in German Romanticism, that stressed participation in divine action and creativity. The Renaissance saw an unprecedented theological engagement with Plato's writings (previously largely unavailable in the West) and those of Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proclus, rich in participatory metaphysics, including translations. The quest for participation in beauty underlay the creative productivity of this period. The Dominican Friar Francisco de Vitoria (1483–1546) based his account of inalienable rights on Aquinas's account of natural law as a participation in God's nature (the eternal law). This became the bedrock of international law. Particularly creative among Renaissance Christian Platonists was Nicholas of Cusa, who returned to participation time and again. The idea of a non-contrastive relationship between God and creatures is present in Nicholas' writings (see [section 3.1](#)), for instance, with God as 'not other' (*non aliud*). Creativity, as a way in which one thing proceeds from another, is also significant in his works, both in thinking about human language and knowing, and in discussions of divine creativity, with the Son as the Father's 'Art'.

The Romantics saw nature as a revelation or outworking of the divine Spirit. Aware of worldly tensions and divisions, they also looked through and beyond them to the source or realm where they are unified (Craig 1996). Ideas familiar from early participatory writing were often pushed to extremes, for instance in a weaker distinction between God and creatures. Participation through love and emotion was also important, as a corrective to rationalistic approaches to philosophy. In a world thought to be deadened to God's presence in nature, it fell to artists and writers to reawaken that vision (Hampton 2018: 13–28).

However, just as attention to the derivation of being was not absent before Aquinas, so participation in agency and creativity were not entirely absent before the Renaissance or Romanticism. Aquinas wrote about creatures imitating divine goodness in their own derived goodness, then expressing that in action, thereby imitating and sharing in the divine work of moving others to goodness (*Summa Theologiae* [ST] I.103.4; cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* [SCG] III.70.7). An emphasis on action is also seen in what Norman Russell (2004: 1–2, 9) calls the patristic vision of 'ethical' participation in God, for instance in 'godlike' acts of charity (see for example *Letter to Diognetus*, 10; Cyprian, *On Works and Almsgiving*, 25). In the New Testament, participation in God through action is found

in being a 'fellow-worker' with God (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 6:1; 1 Thess 3:2) and in active participation in Christ's suffering (Col 1:24; 1 Pet 2:21).

3 Participation approached through doctrinal themes

3.1 Creation, providence, and divine action

Participation has been central to the doctrine of creation. As with Judaism and Islam, Christianity stresses the primacy of God by confessing creation as 'out of nothing' (*ex nihilo*): everything is created and nothing is prior to creation, other than God. Nothing stands eternally over and against the creator, 'out of which' God formed the world. With God alone as source and foundation, the act of creation is fundamentally a participatory relation of derivation and dependence, persisting as long as the creature exists. This contrasts with the idea, which might be labelled 'Deist', that creatures sustain themselves in being once created.

Approached in terms of participation, creaturely forms, natures, or essences are seen as varied finite imitations of divine plenitude – a relation of divine exemplarity – with each creature imitating a divine idea, or some aspects of divine excellence. Among Protestant writers, the derivation of natures from God is less-discussed, often out of a wariness of natural theology (following Barth), as one might be tempted to extrapolate from creatures to divine perfection, and because of a stress on human fallenness which can sit awkwardly with notions of creaturely excellence.

In these aspects of a doctrine of creation, Christians have found common ground with Platonism. Indeed, forms of Christianity that stress participation are a lively and enduring form of Platonism. The *Timaeus* was particularly admired, whether for its creation myth – with a divine being forming creation after the pattern of eternal archetypes (*Timaeus* 27c–47e) – or its reference to the 'Maker and Father' of the universe (*Timaeus* 28c). From later Neoplatonism, Christianity was influenced by the idea of creation as an emanation from God (for instance in Plotinus) and by developments (for instance in Proclus and Iamblicus) that refined the meaning of participation to stress and safeguard divine transcendence. Significant influences on Christianity in this area run from Plotinus to Augustine, from Proclus to Pseudo-Dionysius (a central influence on late Medieval mysticism), and through a Latin translation of an Arabic adaptation of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, known as *The Book of Causes*, mistakenly attributed to Aristotle.

As Kathryn Tanner (2013) has noted, the language of derivation from an ultimate source was not adopted by Christians uncritically, nor without adaptation, making creation *ex nihilo* a 'mixed metaphor'. They took craftsmanship from the *Timaeus* tradition, with its sense of direct divine engagement, but removed eternal pre-existing matter. From

emanation, they took the total derivation of everything, but added divine choice and direct involvement in shaping creation, which was less pronounced, or absent, in Plotinus. Christianity thus sees creation as deriving in its totality by a participation from God that is both more direct and total than rival Platonisms (with God alone the origin, and no primal matter or intermediaries), while also seeing God as yet more transcendent (since no chain of intermediaries link God to creation).

Descriptions of creation in terms of participation differ from pantheism (and panentheism). Creation *ex nihilo* is a donation from God that is not continuous with God, marking an absolute distinction between creation and creator. While God is creation's efficient, formal, and final cause (agent, exemplar, and goal), God is not creation's material cause: creation is not 'made out of' God (although God is the creator of matter). That said, while writers on participation have historically stressed its distinction from pantheism or panentheism, some have recently seen a kinship (e.g. Hart 2022).

Another feature of a participatory perspective, much commented upon in recent decades, is the description of God as too transcendent for creatures and creator to be in conflict, with God therefore not 'distant' from creation (Rosemann 1996; Tanner 2005; Davison 2019). This vision has been called 'non-contrastive', since God cannot be compared or contrasted with creatures as if they were examples in some wider genus. God does not stand over and against the creature, and immanence and transcendence are correlated.

This paradigm is central to a participatory approach to providence and the relation between divine and creaturely action. Acting in all action, God is the source of all agency, rather than crowding out the agency of the creature. The language of primary and secondary causation has been common, with creatures as secondary causes, given their causality under – and within – God's action as primary cause. This approach readily sees creatures as drawn into the divine work: in the 'godlikeness' of charity, or in diffusing goodness to others, in imitation of God as the cause of all good (to pick two examples from above). Approached in these participatory terms, much work on 'divine action' in the dialogue between theology and science (cast as 'intervention') is problematic. Creation does not have the distance or independence from God that 'intervention' seems to imply (Davison 2023b).

3.2 Doctrine of God

The doctrines of creation and God have been elaborated side by side. The description of creation as existing by partaking from God contrasts with the equally-central idea that God neither derives from nor partakes of anything. Aquinas wrote that God *is* being, while creatures *have* being, *received* from God: 'for whatever is found in anything by participation must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially' (ST I.44.1; see Kerr 2019).

God is the ‘unparticipating’. Somewhat paradoxically, traditions that describe creation as a participation in God have also described God as ‘unparticipated’. The linguistic roots lie in Iamblichus’s distinction between the participating (*metéchon*, namely creation), the participation (*metechómenon*, what is received by creatures from God, such as goodness or specific form), and the ‘unparticipated’ (*améthehton*, God as source). Through Pseudo-Dionysius (*Epistle* 9.2), this distinction came to Albert the Great (*De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*) and Aquinas (*On Separated Substances*, 1; *Exposition of On the Divine Names*, 2.1, 4), among others. In Neoplatonism, this threefold distinction served to separate God (the unparticipated) from creation (the participating) by means of what is received from God but is not God itself (the participated). Christian theologians tended to avoid talk of intermediaries. ‘The participated’ is that which is in God divinely and in creatures in a creaturely way, as a finite likeness to God.

In Eastern Orthodoxy, concerns about divine transcendence and ‘unparticipatability’ are reflected in the distinction between the divine essence, which is never shared nor seen (it is unparticipated by creatures) and the divine energies, which are participated and may even be seen by the saints in this life. This distinction is typically traced to Basil:

We know our God through his operations [*energeiōn*], but do not undertake to approach near to his essence. His operations [*energeiai*] come down to us, but his essence remains beyond our reach. (Letter 234.1, Basil the Great 1895: 274; cf. *Against Eunomius*, I.14)

It came to prominence with Gregory Palamas (1883). Whether the energies and essence are really distinct in God is disputed, both in the interpretation of Palamas and as a broader point of doctrine (Lossky 1957; Williams 1999: 128–156).

For some Christian writers, saying that God is participated yet unparticipable is a paradox to be embraced (*Triads*, III.1.29, III.2.25, the former in Palamas 1983: 84–85). More prosaically, the point is that what the creature receives from God (as a participation from God), comes to them not as God’s own being but as created being. It is a created likeness to God’s uncreated perfection, and in that vital sense God is unparticipated. As Aquinas had it: ‘according to what it is in itself, the first principle is communicated to nothing, and does not go out from itself’ (*Exposition of On the Divine Names*, 2.2, as found in Marsh 1994). The creature does not receive the divine being itself but a likeness to it (*Commentary on the Physics of Aristotle*, book 1, lecture 15, note 135; cf. *ST* I.13.9 ad 1).

Another participatory angle on the doctrine of God relates to the theology of the Trinity, with the insistence that the three Persons share equally in divinity or Godhead. Participation serves here as contrast and denial. Earlier writers such as Origen described the Son and Spirit as participating in the divinity of the Father (Russell 2004: 142, 150; see

also The Spirit in the Christian Bible), receiving divinity of a derivative and secondary form. However, for Athanasius (and many after him) participation was denied of the Son and Spirit, who are divine by nature, not by participation, and therefore as divine as the Father. Nothing can deify, Athanasius wrote, that is not itself divine. Therefore, if the human being is made a 'god' by participation in the Son and Spirit, neither the Son nor Spirit, as themselves agents of deification, are divine by participation in another (*Contra Arianos*, 1.9; 3.1; *De synodis*, 51; *Epistula ad Serapionem* 1.24; cf. Augustine, *Tractates on John*, 23.5).

3.3 Analogy and religious language

A participatory metaphysics of creation undergirds the influential discussion of religious language as analogy, notably by Aquinas (*ST* I.13; *SCG* I.30–34). On this view, human words – although grounded in our speech about created things – can be used to speak about God, because what they name in their mundane register (e.g. 'gift' or 'justice') comes from God, and therefore bears some likeness to the creator. The relation between how we use a word of God and of creatures is therefore not simply 'equivocal' (use with no common meaning). Nor is it 'univocal' (identical in meaning), since the distinction between God and creatures is absolute. Rather, the relation between the use of a word in speaking about creatures and that in speaking about God is analogical, as a likeness that emerges against a backdrop of yet greater unlikeness (Davison 2019: 171–197; Sherman 2008: 83). As Aquinas (*ST* I.13.3) put it, our way of speaking (*modus significandi*) is always creaturely, even when speaking of God, but the things about which we speak (*res significata*) are more true of God than of the creatures where we first encounter them – at least when they are perfections (justice, giving, etc.) – although we cannot fully know what it means to say them of God.

This account of analogy has language in mind. However, since God is the origin of everything good and characterful about creatures, including most foundationally their being, an analogy in speech rests on an analogy in being (*analogia entis*; Pryzwara 2013). Much debate has followed Karl Barth's hostility to the notion (see Barth 1975: xiii, 'the invention of the Antichrist'; 1957: 81–83, which suggests development in his thinking; and 1995: 499, underlining that his initial opposition remained; see also White 2011). Barth worried that the idea of analogy in being between God and creatures licenses us to describe God by extrapolation from creatures. However, while the account of creation associated with analogy might work as the basis for some form of natural theology, historical discussions of analogy have primarily had the language of scripture in view. The conundrum is how any human words, learned and shaped in a creaturely way, can refer to God, even when used in scripture. Moreover, no continuity between God and creatures is supposed, and any likeness is fundamentally asymmetrical, such that creation bears

a likeness to God but not God to creation, as a statue might be said to be like its human subject, not the human being like the statue.

3.4 Christology

In David Burrell's (2010) estimation, a Christian account of the relation between creation and creator developed by thinking about the relation between humanity and divinity in Christ, not least in terms of participation and what has been widely called a 'non-competitive'/'non-contrastive' paradigm. The connection between Christology and soteriology is equally striking. Daniel Keating (2007) analyses the 'exchange formula': in Christ God came to share what we are, that we might come to share what God is. Two senses of participation are found here. One describes 'how different particulars share some common element', for instance, how all human beings share or participate in a common humanity (Keating 2007: 97). The first half of the formula sees God taking up or sharing in humanity in this sense (cf. Heb 2:14, with its participatory language of sharing: *koinōnein* and *metechein*). The other sense of participation involves 'the unequal relationship between what is essential and what is derivative', with that which has-by-derivation receiving from that which has-in-itself. The second part of the formula ('that we might share in what God is') involves that form of participation. In contrast to the first meaning, human beings do not become another example of a general category of 'god'. Rather, this is 'the unequal and derivative sharing by the creature in the infinite Creator [... whereby] we as partakers never become, strictly speaking, what we partake of' (Keating 2007: 102).

Much Christian theology holds to the Chalcedonian principle that Christ's humanity is unchanged by its assumption by the Word. While Christ is divine in his Person, and his humanity is that of the Son, that does not prevent him relating to God humanly and participating in God as humans can. Thus, alongside Christ's knowledge, according to his divine nature, he possesses every form of human intellectual participation in God: the beatific vision of the blessed, the infused knowledge of the prophet, and the empirical or acquired knowledge belonging to human reason as such (ST III.9). Likewise, alongside the perfection coming from hypostatic union, Christ also participates in God by reception of grace, as any human being might, and his divine excellence did not prevent the growth in likeness to God that belongs to human virtue or training (ST III.7). Consubstantial with the Holy Spirit by nature, Christ also participates in the Holy Spirit as any perfected human being does, and relates to God the Father by prayer and by participation in Jewish religious practice (Legge 2016).

In the late Middle Ages, belief in the participatory grounding of created natures in God began to be eclipsed by nominalism (rejecting an ontology of shared natures). This less participatory theology consequently began to affirm new possibilities for divine power

(voluntarism), such as God's incarnation as an ass or stone (*Centiloquium Theologicum*, n. 7, ll. 6–11 in 2013: 385–386), of disputed authorship, likely from the third quarter of the fourteenth century). The idea of sharing – God in humanity, and humanity in God – had slipped from its previously central position.

Participation often features in Christology in relation to redemption and grace, but it also bears upon the Second Person's role in creation. Creation is through the Son, who – as Word – is the Form and wellspring behind all forms. The relation between Christ and creation has received detailed discussion from Rowan Williams (2018) and Mark McIntosh (2021).

3.5 Theological anthropology

The central participatory locus in theological anthropology is the image of God (*imago Dei* – Gen 1:26–27; see [section 3.1](#) on divine exemplarity in creation more widely). Among interpretations, the most significant for a participatory theology has been a 'faculties' or 'structural' approach, with the image of God located in capacities such as intellect or freedom by which human beings (and any other comparable creatures) imitate God as their origin and exemplar. In the West, the Augustinian triplet 'memory, intellect, and will' has been influential (imaging the Father, Son, and Spirit).

In recent decades alternative interpretations of the *imago Dei* have gained ground, particularly 'relational' and 'functional' accounts. The former sees human reflection of God in human relationships and capacity for relationality; the latter stresses undertaking divinely-appointed tasks or roles, recalling that the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1 is associated with subduing or stewarding the Earth (Hehn 1915; Middleton 2005). Discussion of relational and functional accounts has not necessarily brought participation to the surface, but they can readily be understood as participations (respectively) in divine relationally and in divine agency and providence. Dorothy L. Sayers drew attention to human work and creativity as participations in divine work and creativity, suggesting that Christians see 'all arts, all letters, all labour, and all knowing' as participatory in a sacramental sense (Sayers 1941: 67; 1942).

Although relational and functional accounts have been advanced as alternatives to faculty-based accounts, these interpretations need not be in competition, and may even be co-implicated: only a creature with certain capacities, for instance, can be relational or active in certain ways. Moreover, participation in God through capacities has frequently been understood as inherently relational and active. For Augustine, as for many who followed him, the *imago Dei* is not so much found in the bare capacity for memory, intellect, and will as participations in God, but in the active and relational participation of remembering, knowing, and loving God. Participation in divine work also features prominently in Aquinas, though he has typically been seen as stressing a functional account.

A christological angle on the image of God is common in contemporary theology, Christ being ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15; cf. Heb 1:3; see [section 3.1](#) and [section 3.7](#)).

Feminist theologians have addressed participatory aspects of the *imago Dei* with critique, retrieval, and development. A principal concern has been that the tradition has set up men as the primary image-bearers, and women only secondarily, not least under the influence of Paul: ‘man is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man’ (1 Cor 11:7; Ruether 1985). Elizabeth Johnson is among those who have urged feminist theologians to reclaim the *imago Dei*. Although its christological inflection has been ‘more difficult to grasp’ (on account of Christ’s male sex), she recalls the insistence in the Early Church (e.g. Eusebius) that [baptism](#) and martyrdom show women to be equal to men as participants in Christ, by which they also display him to the world (Johnson 1992: 69–75).

Usefully provocative questions about the relationship between participation and the image of God – and their connection to Christology and grace – are raised by the prospect of a situation (counterfactual on Earth, but realized possibly elsewhere in the cosmos) of non-fallen rational species (Davison 2023a). Even an unfallen creature could be elevated by grace to a deeper participation in God than anything pertaining to nature alone, typically described as *theosis* or *deification*, for instance in the gift of beholding God in the beatific vision. Thus, there is participation by grace that goes beyond restoration, or the removal of sin, which transcends the capacity of the *imago Dei*: grace not abolishing nature but perfecting it.

Whether an orientation to this elevation and consummation is intrinsic to the human being as such became a fraught question in theological anthropology in the twentieth century (Milbank 2005; Feingold 2010). Some, following Henri de Lubac, place an implicit desire for a deified participation in God at the heart of what it means to be human. Others, following a (contested) neo-scholastic interpretation of Aquinas, argue that, for grace to be fully gratuitous, it and what it confers must be extrinsic to the natural human constitution. While both approaches can be set out in participatory terms, advocates of participatory metaphysics in theology have tended to champion the de Lubacian perspective.

3.6 Sin and evil

The principal participatory approach to sin and evil interprets evil as a privation or lack. Evil involves a creature failing fully to embody (and in that sense participate in) the excellence of its specific creaturely nature. That is also a failure to receive from the divine source of the creature’s good, an occlusion in its participation in God. Evil is an attenuation, whether with natural evil (a sick animal fails to participate fully in what that animal can be) or moral evil (the evil person falls short of full participation in the virtue that marks human excellence). Nonetheless, each thing remains the kind of thing it is: evil’s lack works out

at the level of accidents rather than substance (to use Aristotelian terms). A participatory and privative view of evil will not allow evil to define what something fundamentally is. Its specific nature remains good as such.

Solidarity in sin and redemption, with its notions of corporate identity, is another form of participation. This is seen in scriptural texts where human moral or spiritual standing is determined by participation in a pivotal or summatory figure: Adam and Christ. This is particularly evident in Paul: 'as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1 Cor 15:22; cf. Rom 5). As a parallel, Hebrews 7 assumes that progeny participate in the actions of their forebears, with Abraham's descendants present in him ('in the loins') in his encounter with the christological figure of Melchizedek. Augustine asked whether human beings participate in (are bound up with) the wrongdoing of all their forebears, or only that of Adam and Eve, whom he saw as our first parents and the first to have sinned. He was agnostic as to the answer (*Enchiridion* XIII.46–47), but Aquinas denied it (*ST* II-I.81.2).

Christian theology has frequently supposed that everyone inevitably participates in one or another state or kingdom, for good or ill, with a corresponding manner of life and standing before God. The same biblical passage that talks about being 'participants in the divine nature' (1 Pet 1:4) contrasts that with a state of 'corruption that is in the world because of lust', such that one can either belong to that kingdom, or to 'the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (1:11). Alongside this idea of belonging to one or another kingdom or rule (as also in the Synoptic Gospels), see Paul's contrast between being a 'partner' or partaker (*koinōnós*) of either demons or of Christ, or one who partakes (*metéchéō*) either from the table of demons or the table of the Lord (1 Cor 10:14–22). Ignatius of Loyola set this out in military terms (*Spiritual Exercises*, second week, fourth day), writing that everyone fights under one banner or another, Christ's or the devil's. Liberation theology has placed a similar emphasis on the impossibility of being a non-participant or neutral bystander in matters of justice and injustice. This is also an ecclesiological position, with the church as the site where the kingdom or reign of God takes shape, primarily at the level of the local congregation (Sobrinho 1996; Ellacuría 2013; see also The Church in the Christian Bible).

3.7 Salvation and deification

The language of participation is integral to much writing on salvation, often cast as participation in God (deification) by participation 'in Christ', through (or bound up with) participation in the church and sacraments (Keating 2007: 97; Williams 1999: 162). Here, participation stands as a more ultimate category than 'salvation' or 'redemption', since the latter are contingent upon sin, as its remedy. Deification and incorporation into Christ can stand as the end of the divine plan, whether or not human beings (or other creatures) are fallen, and involve something even greater than repair or restoration (see section 3.5).

The 'exchange formula' ([section 3.4](#)), central to a range of Christian traditions, has already been noted: that God came to share (or participate) in humanity so that we might share or participate in the divine life. Among the 'models of atonement' put forward in historical assessments, this most obviously aligns with an 'ontological model' (called 'Greek', although that risks underplaying its significance in Western sources). This is 'ontological' because it rests on who and what Christ is, and on a new state of being for the redeemed human being. A typical formulation might say that the Son, as the one whose image human beings bear, comes to those image-bearers in their fallen state, to restore or reburnish that image and exalt it beyond being an 'image' by nature to a 'likeness' by grace. Viewed one way, the incarnation is salvific *as such*, in that God assumes human nature; approached differently, it is salvific because those incorporated into Christ share in his death and resurrection. These perspectives often appear side by side.

Different points of emphasis are found in historical writing on salvation as deification or participation in God, although they rarely stand in opposition to one another. Some patristic writers placed the emphasis on participation 'in divine attributes', while others emphasized participation 'in an intra-divine relationship' (Williams 2003: 106). Some stressed 'intentional union' by will and intellect, others stressed participation in more 'substantial' or ontological terms, in the 'reconstruction of the human spirit at its very roots'. Norman Russell (2004: 2, 9) distinguished between an 'ethical' deification, participating in or imitating God by action, and a 'realistic' approach, centred on the ontological transformation of the believer, often with a sacramental emphasis. A further christological angle on salvation as participation in God is found in recent discussions of [justification](#) by faith as participation in the faith or faithfulness of Christ, rather than resting on the subjective faith or faithfulness of the believer (on a participatory view these need not be set off against one another).

Union with Christ (or being 'in Christ') was important in the soteriology of Protestant writers such as Luther, Calvin ('the life of the soul is our union with God', Calvin 1853: 205, on Heb 9:14), and Barth, sometimes stressing an ecclesial and sacramental angle, or sharing in his sufferings. The language of deification or *theosis* was largely absent, although Calvin wrote that

the end of the gospel is to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us [... to be] partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow. (Calvin 1855: 371; on 2 Pet 1:4, closing with what looks like an allusion to Plato's *Theaetetus*)

Barth resolutely objected to deification, while championing the language of participation or being 'hidden in God' (Barth 1958: 89; McCormack 2006; see also [section 3.8](#)). The

Finnish Lutheran scholarship mentioned above has stressed participation in God through Christ (drawing particularly on the earlier writings of Luther), in scholarship partly born of dialogue with the Orthodox (Mannermaa 1998; Saarinen 1996; Vainio 2008). Aristotle's participatory epistemology offers an important paradigm here, whereby the knower participates in the known and is united to it. In Luther's thought, this is applied to faith as a kind of knowing, with justification as the effect of that disposition of faith, which brings a share in Christ and his righteousness.

Accounts of salvation founded on substitution seem to contrast with ideas of participation, because they focus on Christ standing 'instead of' us, rather than on what he shares with us and we with him. That opposition, however, may be more apparent than real, since it is generally considered significant that the one who substitutes for the rest of humanity (for instance in paying a debt of honour or – on some accounts – in bearing punishment) shares or participates in the same nature as those for whom he stands. A participatory dimension to substitution is only truly marginal with the most marked voluntarism: Christ's life and death avail for our good only because deemed to be meritorious, or sufficiently meritorious, by the Father's will.

Alongside traditions of writing about deification and participation in Christ, and therefore participation in Christ's resurrection, lies the parallel tradition of writing about participation in Christ's suffering and death and in his resurrection (Matt 16:24; Rom 6:5–11; 8:17; 2 Cor 1:4–7; 3:8–12; Gal 2:20; Phil 3:10–11; Col 1:24; 1 Pet 1:13). There is a strong association with baptism (Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12–14). Sharing in Christ's death is not simply a prelude to regeneration, but part of Christ's restorative work. Destruction of the 'old self' (Rom 6:6; Eph 4:2) and the power of sin and hold of death is part of what makes the good news good, however astringent that process might be. Although it is in one sense accomplished once and for all in baptism, a continual 'putting to death' has been seen as an important part of the Christian life. More metaphysically-orientated theological discussions of participation, even when seeking to integrate a wide range of participatory themes in doctrine, have underplayed the significance of participation in the death of Christ (for instance, Davison 2019). This is often described as 'mortification': 'the only source of our mortification is our participation in the death of Christ' (Calvin 1845 III.iii.9; Calvin 1980: 125, on Rom 6:6; cf. *Commentary on Colossians*, on Col 1:24). It has offered a way for 'ordinary Christians', often poor, to understand and 'use' deprivations and illness in a way that has seemed productive and meaningful. Prosperous contemporary theologians (for whom this idea may be increasingly unfamiliar) should think twice before claiming to know better than those in painful circumstances about how understand their suffering in relation to Christ. However, some critique may be due: theologically, this piety may allow death and suffering to eclipse life and restoration in Christ; politically or ethically, it becomes a means to suppress protest against an unjust situation.

As introduced above ([section 3.6](#)), liberation theologies have stressed the connection between participation in God (as participation in Christ, and in the church as Christ's body) and the vocation of the church and Christian as participants in the divine work of overcoming injustice and building an equitable community. Salvation is understood as being (or as involving) an investiture with agency and responsibility of those who have previously, and sinfully, been denied them: 'God's election of the oppressed for participation with him in the struggle of freedom' (Cone 1975; cf. Reddie 2014: 7, 109–112).

Tanner offered an extensive and influential discussion of the relation between soteriological angles on participation and those in creation in her work *Christ the Key* (2010). She distinguishes between 'weak participation' that grants being in creation and 'strong participation' which deifies the creature in salvation (see Davison 2019: 276–277 and Zahl 2020: 101–108).

3.8 Eschatology

Theologians writing in a participatory fashion differ on whether to present the eschatological state as one of attainment, and therefore repose in God, or one of continued progress and growth. In the latter case, the eschatological destiny of the creature is an ever-intensifying participation by love and knowledge, in which God always infinitely exceeds the beatified creature. This lends a dynamism to eternity that retains something of time's onward march. It is particularly associated with Eastern Christian traditions, and pivotally with Gregory of Nyssa (as *epektasis*). In contrast, Western traditions have historically placed less emphasis on eschatological progress, stressing rest and attainment. If, on the progress view, the redeemed human being is forever pressing into the cloud of divine unknowing, the other view would stress the contentment that comes from the vision of God.

Vision has served as a useful image for eschatological participation in God because it already served as an image for knowledge as the principal way in which one thing can participate in another. According to a view that goes back at least as far as Aristotle (see [section 3.7](#)), to know is to receive from, or share in, that which is known. With talk of vision, one can also underline that the deified creature participating in God is still a creature, since what is known is in the knower according to the manner of the knower, and not according to that which is known. For example, I can know an apple mentally, but it is not present in me in the same physical manner as the apple itself. Thus, the finite creature participates in God finitely and remains finite; the creature participates in the uncreated in a creaturely way, and remains a creature (see *ST* I.26.3 ad 1; II-I.3.1; II-I.4.3 ad 1; III.10.1; *On the Orthodox Faith* 3.3.4, John of Damascus; Davison 2024). In this, as many theologians have insisted, eschatological participation in God perfects

the creature, rather than undoing it, and the humanity of the grace-filled person is more characterfully human, rather than less: 'The glory to which man is called is that he should grow more divine by becoming ever more human' (Staniloae 1969: 374). Barth's concern that participation in God (and, more specifically, participation in Christ) should not be understood as deification belongs in this territory, the divine work making the human being more human, not divine (Barth 1958: 89; McCormack 2006; Neder 2009). Comparison with much participatory writing on deification suggests a difference from Barth in expression more than in substance, as it will generally also insist that the deified creature always remains entirely a creature.

3.9 Pneumatology

Participation is directly associated with the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, for instance in 2 Cor 13:14 where the familiar phrase 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' employs the word *koinonia*, which can also be translated as 'communion' or 'participation'. The same word appears in Phil 2:1, where participation in the Spirit issues in fellowship within the community of the church. The Holy Spirit is also named in relation to other participatory themes, such as adoption (Rom 8:14–16; Gal 4:6). Calvin placed particular stress on the inseparable relation between participation in Christ and in the Spirit (1845: III.i.1; Calvin 1854: 262, on Eph 3:17). Drawing the gift of the Spirit as pledge or first instalment (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13–14), and the relation to the Spirit to sanctification and movement (e.g. in water, wind, and fire), the Spirit has been associated with the completion and perfection of participation (e.g. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter* 3.5).

As seen above ([section 3.2](#)), patristic writers argued for the Spirit's divinity on the grounds that participation in the Spirit is deifying (e.g. Athanasius, Basil, Didymus the Blind). Since we are deified by participation in the Spirit, he must be divine and not simply one who also participates in God.

Didymus (*On the Holy Spirit*) described the goodness of creation as a partaking of the Spirit, and the gift of a fuller participation as the basis for creation's restoration, using the Platonic idea of reception from an undiminished giver (Ayers 2010). More generally, across these authors, participation in the Spirit is worked out in close relation to prayer, spirituality, and ascetic transformation (Zahl 2020: 118–141, discussing Didymus alongside Augustine and Melanchthon). Sarah Coakley has suggested that pneumatology (and Trinitarian theology more widely) should begin with the experience of participation in the Spirit in prayer (2013: 100–151). Reformed theology has stressed the Spirit's work in reception from God in preaching and scripture reading: 'only when God shines in us by the light of His Spirit is there any profit from the Word' (Calvin 1980: 232, on Rom 10:16).

3.10 Ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and prayer

Ecclesiology and sacramental theology are often, even typically, set out in terms of a participation in Christ through the sacramental rite or elements. In Paul, the participatory vision of being 'in Christ' has been described as the key to his thought (Dunn 2006: 395). Michael Gorman, among others, has stressed that discussions of participation in the Pauline Epistles are thoroughly ecclesial and offer a simultaneously theological, moral, and communal (or political) vision, in addition to a spirituality, which he calls 'resurrectional cruciformity' (Gorman 2019).

This is already sacramental, given Paul's close association of participation in Christ with baptism, and ecclesial, given the association of baptism and being 'in Christ' with incorporation into the church as his body (Acts 2:37–42; Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27; 1 Cor 12:13). Despite differences of interpretation, Christians agree that the bread and wine of communion are a sharing or participation (*koinonia*) in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). Calvin wrote that

those who receive his promise by faith are actually made partakers of his flesh and blood [...] The true eating of the flesh of Christ, therefore, is not only pointed out by the sign, but is likewise exhibited in reality. (Calvin 1846: 209 [vol. 3])

Recalling the ecclesial sense of these passages, and Paul's plurals ('we were all baptized'; 'the bread that we break', 1 Cor 12.13; 10.16), recent sacramental theology has expanded upon seeing the sacraments as causes and signs of salvation with themes of belonging to the redeemed community, which is given an active role in the divine work of redemption (Belcher 2011).

Prayer has been understood as a participation in the divine life and purposes, with God praying in believers. Thus, Paul connects the prayerful groanings of creation and the Christian with the Spirit interceding 'with sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8:22–27). George Herbert described prayer as 'God's breath in man returning to his birth' ('Prayer (I)' in Herbert 2011: 178). For Augustine, prayer is an exercise in desire, which expands our capacity to receive from God (*Epistle* 103.8.17).

For Aquinas, prayer does not change God's mind but is a God-given participation in achieving a good that God wills to bring about. Prayer is a participation in divine providence, by which God draws those who pray into the divine work and gives them a share in accomplishing that which God could have brought about other than in response to prayer. In prayerfully seeking any good, believers cultivate a desire for God, from whom the good of what we seek in prayer comes by participation. As a participation in what God also loves, prayer is an induction into friendship with God, since willing the same thing is central to friendship (Aquinas, *SCG* III.95).

Prayer is also associated with ‘filiation’ – becoming God’s children by adoption and regeneration – especially in what is typically taken as the apex of Christ’s teaching on prayer, the ‘Our Father’ or Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). The Christian is invited to address God from a new standing, as a participant in Christ’s divine sonship. Prayer and worship have been understood in parallel terms as entering into an intra-trinitarian exchange: ‘Christ invites us to stand beside him and say “Our Father”’ (Balthasar 1990: 41; cf. McCabe 1987).

Prayer is also described as a way to enter into the mystery or reality of God, as significant as theological scholarship, or more (Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7.4), transforming the one who prays into God’s likeness (Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions of the Psalms* 2.8.73). This mirrors the Old Testament theme that one comes to share in the likeness or character of what one worships or trusts (Ps 115:3–8; 135:15–18): ‘the supremely important thing in religion is to model oneself on the object of one’s worship’ (Augustine of Hippo 2003: 324).

In the twentieth-century West, much discussion of participation concerned the involvement or active lay participation in the prayer of the church, especially with the ‘liturgical movement’ (Triacca 1984). This is connected to participation in a more metaphysical or doctrinal sense. It stems from seeing the whole people of God as ‘in Christ’, and seeing members of his body, and prayer (and supremely the Eucharist), as a participation in Christ’s prayer and offering, and again the vocation of all Christians. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, ‘active participation’ in liturgy and worship is the

right and duty [of the Christian people] by reason of their baptism [...] this full and active participation by all the people [...] is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. (Pope Paul VI 1963: article 14)

Lay participation in worship is also stressed by Black theologians (Cone 1975).

4 Some objections

4.1 Rejection of metaphysics

Discussions of participation are frequently highly metaphysical. Indeed, participation features conspicuously in much current theological interest in metaphysics. One strand of unease about emphasizing participatory themes in theology therefore stems from an unease with metaphysics as such, and advocacy of ‘biblical theology’ over and against ‘philosophical theology’. Much here stems from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberal German Protestant scholarship, with its distrust of ‘Greek’ metaphysical influences in the early Christian history. Deification and other metaphysical notions were

diagnosed as a hijack of Christianity (supposedly an originally Hebraic and unphilosophical religion) by Hellenistic metaphysics (Harnack 1894: 318 [vol. 6]). More recent liberal theology may be wary of participatory metaphysics as being too confident and offering too-complete a view of the world in theological terms. Conversely, participatory metaphysics has featured prominently in criticism of that view, in calls for renewed theological confidence, especially from the Radical Orthodoxy movement (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward 1999).

Eastern Orthodox writing can also express caution about metaphysical accounts of participation, as for instance in an influential work of Eastern spirituality by 'A Monk of the Orthodox Church' (Lev Gillet), who wrote that 'the process of deification cannot be considered apart from the Person of Christ. It is not a metaphysical, a Neoplatonic, deification. It is operated through the Sacred Humanity of our Lord' (Gillet 1945: 99). This does not necessarily require rejection of participation, worked out in more mystical or metaphorical terms.

In Roman Catholicism, outright rejection of the language of participation, or metaphysics as such, is less common. Some schools of thought, however, especially when influenced by analytic philosophy, have been wary of participation as a central metaphysical category – as the ontological key to thinking about creation – preferring to interpret references to participation (and analogy) in historical texts in logical or linguistic terms. Participation would principally be intra-mundane and notional, as with the participation of more specific instances in more general ones (individuals within species, or species within genera). More widely, 'analytic theology' may distrust a participatory approach to metaphysics on the grounds that it looks equivocal, with a slack use of language that comes from its alignment with analogy. If x is analogous to y , there is both similarity and difference: x will be in some ways like y , but also different, since x is not y . That 'analogical interval' may not be compatible with the strict, univocal, syllogistic logic favoured in analytic philosophy. That would require creaturely being and divine being, for instance, to stand as two equivalent instances of something fundamentally identical, just as creaturely and divine justice would be simply alike, and so on. In contrast, on a participatory view, divine and creaturely being or justice are related by derivation and analogy, and likeness and unlikeness, not univocity. If that stands too close to equivocity for the analytic-minded thinker, analytic theology may stand too close to univocity for the participatory-minded theologian.

Another influential metaphysical criticism of participation is suggested in Barth's rejection of what he saw as a static metaphysics of being, essences, and characteristics in favour of one grounded christologically in action and history (Neder 2009). While not wanting to downplay the significance or creativity of Barth's outlook, it has already been noted (section 2, section 3.1, and section 3.7) that scholastic theology is rarely as 'static' as is often supposed: being is an act, and it always issues in action.

4.2 Realism, nominalism, and voluntarism

Early objections to the idea that the created world derives from an imitative participation in something eternal are found in Aristotle, and even Plato. If similarity is based on participation, and if a mundane example and an eternal Form are similar (for instance, a human being and the Form of humanity), that similarity seems to point to a third, yet more ultimate, Form behind them both, in which they both share. If this is correct, that argument could be extended to infinity, and we would never reach the ultimate source of what is shared by everything in that chain (the ‘third man’ argument, Plato, *Parmenides* 132a–c). One reply is that this objection takes insufficiently seriously the sense that the mundane form is nothing other than the eternal form appearing in a mundane guise (Schindler 2005: 22–23; Davison 2019: 110–111). The participation of the mundane in the transcendent explains the likeness between them, without a need for any yet-more-fundamental exemplar.

This objection from Plato was reiterated by Aristotle (*Metaphysics* I.9, 990b). Aristotle was a realist – holding that a real, common substantial form is found in all things of the same kind. Yet he also denied that anything more than immanent specific forms are necessary: no eternal realm of Forms, just their instantiation in concrete particulars. Talk of participation in anything transcendent multiplies ‘empty words and poetical metaphors’; it is useless, ‘contributing’ nothing to ‘sensible things’, either as to their being or to our knowledge of them (*Metaphysics* 991a, in Aristotle 1984: 1566 [vol. 2]). This outlook would recur in Christianity. As Étienne Gilson wrote, alongside the Platonic strand to Christianity – which places ‘the reason for things outside of the things themselves’ (a participatory outlook) – we encounter a recurring Aristotelianism that is content to seek ‘the reason for things in the things themselves, detaching and separating the world from God’ (1938: 88).

Aristotle’s realism was left behind in nominalism’s even less participatory inclination (recurrent since the eleventh century) to dispense with the category of shared substantial forms. Also tending against a participatory outlook is a voluntarist desire to ground created things in the divine will (seen as newly arbitrary from the late Middle Ages) rather than in a participation in God’s intellect (or nature), not least so as to free God from any determinative bond to creatures. That in turn renders creatures plastic before the divine will. Around this time, philosophy and theology began to separate, leading to a de-sacralized philosophy (in which participation features less, or not at all, as being too theological), and a de-rationalized theology (in which participation features less and less, as being too philosophical).

More recent departures from participatory realism take a variety of forms. An existentialist opposition to a secure grounding for natures attempted to elevate existence and the will over essence and determination. Others criticized any attempt to ground visible reality

in anything yet more ultimate, arguing that it inevitably tended to devalue mundane things in comparison with that which lies beyond (Nussbaum 1992, alongside whom we might add Friedrich Nietzsche or Don Cupitt). Hannah Arendt's response was that the turn in modernity away from grounding things in God has ultimately not been one that 'threw men back upon the world', but one that brought 'alienation' from it (Arendt 1958: 253–254), with a parallel diagnosis from Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward (1999). Christian openness to Platonism and participation has taken multiple trajectories: some more 'world denying', others less 'world denying' (Davison and Sherman 2020: 374–377; Hampton 2020: 392–395). As Jean-Jacques Wunenburger has commented, while Platonism may suggest a 'huge and irrevocable devaluation of the image' in favour of the exemplar, it can alternatively offer an 'apotheosis' of the image and its value, not least in its Christian forms, seeing the image as a 'manifestation' of the ultimate and not a mere shadow, particularly when set out alongside belief in the 'spatio-temporal Incarnation of the Absolute God' (Wunenburger 1997: 148–149).

The voluntarist nominalist eclipse of participation has been linked with the birth of early modern science. According to one influential view, first associated with M. B. Foster (1935; 1936), the development of science followed a shift in the later middle ages towards belief that natures are arbitrarily created by God, rather than reflecting his character by virtue of a participatory origin. Consequently, theologically-based assumptions or thought experiments about the nature of creatures would no longer suffice to ground an understanding of what they are like. Only empirical study could tell us what God had, as it happened, chosen to do. That interpretation of the scientific revolution has been criticized on several grounds, however, not least by Peter Harrison (2002; 2009). He argues that the new emphasis on scientific method rests instead on Augustinian pessimism about human reason after the fall. More than simply a turn to the empiricism, the individual and communal practices of the sciences were also vital. Careful recording, attention to, and description of method, and public scrutiny, offered a bulwark against error and self-deception. Moreover, Christian Platonism, with its discussions of participation, was more influential in the growth of science than Foster warranted (Davison and Sherman 2020).

4.3 Experience

Participation features prominently in contemporary soteriology ([section 3.7](#)). Simeon Zahl (2020: 86–92) has criticized the accompanying 'ontological' approach to salvation and relation to God, with its tendency towards objective metaphysically-based claims about the redeemed person's new state, as floating free from the practical implications of salvation and its bearing on human feeling:

Instead of talking, as the New Testament so often does, about the effects of the Spirit's work on real bodies in time, theologians revert instead to ontological language about union

with Christ, about salvific participation in the Godhead, or about deification and *theosis*. (Zahl 2020: 71)

He finds examples of this tendency in T. F. Torrance and Kathryn Tanner (Zahl 2020: 95–108). Zahl also considers recent Neo-Thomism, praising it for having a ‘much closer and less ambivalent connection between ontology and experience’ (2020: 109), but judges its empirical expectations about the transformation of human lives, through participation in God, to be ‘overoptimistic’ when compared to Christian experience (2020: 116). Describing salvation in terms of participation need not, however, focus on the ontological state of the Christian at the expense of interest in a transformation of emotion, desire, or a sense of one’s place in the world. These themes are not always lacking in theological writing in a participatory mode. However, more could be done to develop Zahl’s insight that an ‘affective and desiderative transformation’ is itself ‘a mode of participation in God through the Spirit’ (2020: 82, 118–141). It should also be noted that a significant participatory angle on salvation has seen it as participation in a new community – in the church as Christ’s body – and in a new set of relationships, activities, and habits. Seeing salvation as a participation in Christ’s sonship (Gal 4:5; Heb 2:11) also has an affective dimension, as does the invitation to cooperate with God in the divine work of restoring and refashioning the world (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 6:1; 1 Thess 3:2).

4.4 The priority of God

A critique of participation from John Webster has ‘communion ecclesiology’ in its sights, and the idea that ‘the end of the creature is to participate in community with God and other creatures’ (2005: 80). Webster feared that this blurs the distinction between God and creatures, merges Christ with the church, and denies the absolute priority of God and God’s counsel (2005: 83–86). Webster’s discussion is useful for drawing attention to ways in which participation can be used in extreme or incautious ways, but it may not have purchase on more considered and historically-grounded participatory writing. For instance, Webster saw participatory thinking as involving an ‘inclusive’ view of divine perfections, where (in a somewhat Hegelian sense) God, and God’s perfections, are only fully realized through creatures, or in concert with them (2005: 80). Participatory writers, however, have typically stressed divine simplicity and immutability, and exactly the ‘unilateral’ or ‘asymmetrical’ relation between God and creatures on which Webster insists (Webster 2005: 76; Mascall 1943: 95–112). Similarly, Webster’s insistence that the relation of creatures to God is one of ‘relation-in-distinction’ rather than ‘identity’ fits with a participatory insistence that participation is not identity (Davison 2019: 65–83). In this criticism, Webster also denied the participatory proposal that God’s transcendence is so absolute as to render any contrastive or competitive relation between God and creatures invalid. Rather, Webster saw creation *ex nihilo* (‘out of nothing’) as requiring an ‘inversely

proportional' (and therefore contrastive) relation between God and creatures (2005: 92). Only half a decade later, however, Webster had tempered his worry about participation-as-pantheism, and elaborated a profoundly participatory account of creation soon after (2010: 387; 2013).

5 Alternative accounts of participation

These criticisms of participatory approaches to theology, with suggested responses, highlight the need to be clear about what is meant by 'participation' in any given instance. This article has concentrated on the long-held sense of participation as a reception from God that founds or transforms the creatures' whole being, in which God is unchanged by this relation to creatures. While this can be said to constitute the principal participatory thread running through Christian history, it does not monopolize the use of the word. For instance, there are uses to do with inclusion (for instance in worship) and practical partnership (see [section 3.1](#), [section 3.5](#), [section 3.7](#), and [section 3.10](#)), which are distinct from that metaphysical vision, but usually seen as being at least compatible with it, and often entailed by it.

A more radical alternative understanding of participation comes from process thought. This will generally be sympathetic to the idea that creation is shaped by God. However, inasmuch as process theology tends to be panentheistic, it will reject the insistence on a strict non-continuity of being between creatures and creator. Conversely, process theologians typically see something about creation – such as its being and materiality – as underived, eternally standing alongside God, and will therefore reject the participatory idea that everything about creation, including its matter and existence, is entirely contingent and derived. Just as significantly, process theology foundationally rejects divine immutability. That, combined with a denial of creation's total contingency, allows process-influenced thinkers to talk about God 'participating in creation' in a way that is foreign to the participatory thinking otherwise reflected in this article, which would find that phrase too redolent of viewing God as an object among objects, a cause among causes.

Paul Tillich (1951: 244–247 [vol. 1]) offered a related but not identical sense of participation to that set out in this article. Although he wrote about God 'participating in everything that is', rather than creatures participating in God, his meaning remained close to the theological and metaphysical view described here. He took the description of God as 'personal', for instance, to mean that God is 'the ground of everything personal', while 'divine life' is the 'ground and aim' of all life (1951: 245). He saw the dynamic of God 'being with' all things as reminiscent of Plato's Forms: as 'the presence of the [eternal] essences in temporal existence' (1951: 245). Nonetheless, Tillich's account also differs from the understanding of participation otherwise in view in this article, not least in seeing God as an agent among agents, such that God 'has community with' creation and 'shares its

destiny' (1951: 245), including some element of becoming (1951: 246–247). Nonetheless, Tillich avoided positing an independent existence for creation, writing that 'the divine participation creates that in which it participates' (1951: 245).

While this article has primarily explored participation in metaphysical terms, participation has also been deployed in images and metaphors, not least in scriptural sources. Prominent references include the body, the family (adoption, becoming a child of God, Christ and other Christians as brothers and sisters) and botany (grafting of trees and vines). Metaphysical and metaphorical or image-based approaches need not be in conflict. What can be described metaphysically can also be described metaphorically.

6 Interfaith dialogue

While not wanting to force other religious traditions into concepts from Christian sources, much that has been set out here in relation to the doctrines of God and creation has deep parallels in varieties of Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu thought. To that list can be added various types of Greek 'pagan' thought, especially varieties of Platonism, which have been an interfaith partner for Jews, Christians, and Muslims since late antiquity (Harris 1982; Cleary 1997; Goodman 1992; Morewedge 1992; Parry and Anagnostou-Laoutides 2023; Gregorios 2002). For substantial traditions within these religions, something close to participation is central to how they conceive the relationship of creation in its diversity to God as its source: as a relationship of the many to the one, of so many limited likenesses to the infinite archetype (Arber 1957; Hart 2013). Such ideas open useful avenues of conversation between world religions, as also with indigenous traditions, and the adherents of post-confessional spiritualities.

Notions of participation span these traditions in part because they arrived at similar conclusions independently. However, this interfaith perspective also rests on a long history of an exchange of ideas and texts being exchanged on precisely this theme. We have already mentioned the *Book of Causes* ([section 3.1](#)), with influential commentaries by Albert the Great and Aquinas, for instance: a Christian Latin translation of an Islamic Arabic translation and adaptation of a Greek work (the *Elements of Theology*) by the Neoplatonist Proclus (Calma 2021).

In addition to providing bonds within a shared history of thought, the metaphysics of participation offers resources for conceptualizing interreligious dialogue itself, approaching religious diversity and pluralism in participatory terms, as about the relation of the many to the one. In participatory metaphysics, adherents of these traditions have a way to think about how a multiplicity of perspectives, histories, and experiences relates to divine unity, and of diversity as part of how finite means bear witness to an infinite end.

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