

**Does God Change?
Reconciling the Immutable God with the God of Love**

by
Jennifer A. Herrick

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**DOES
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**RECONCILING
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A THOMISTICALLY
INSPIRED ENQUIRY**



**JENNIFER ANNE HERRICK
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SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY**

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ABSTRACT

THE ISSUE

The immutable God and the God of Love? Are they compatible?

Does God change? Does it matter?

If God is the immutable God, as interpreted from Classical Christian Tradition, a God who remains unalterable, what is the point of prayer? Does prayer, or any of our actions in the world for that matter, have any effect on God? Can we move God? Is God simply a static Being? Is prayer of use if God is absolutely immutable? Does God respond to prayer or to our actions in the world?

Classical Tradition has presented us with a picture of an immutable God, a mono-polar God, who remains unalterable, unchanged, transcendent to our history in the world. Yet scriptural revelation and personal religious experience presents us with a God who, whilst transcendent to the world is also immanent, the God of Love who creates, redeems, a God who is affected by, who responds to, what is happening in the world; a God who listens and relates.

PROCEDURE FOLLOWED - an exploratory structure.

Taking the reader through an exploratory structure utilizing Scriptural texts, Church documents, historical theological and philosophical debate, together with human Judaeo-Christian experience carries the aim of discerning and presenting an interpretation of the nature of God's immutability which appears best able to afford some reconciliation of the traditional viewpoint with biblical revelation and personal religious experience. The structure of the thesis thus involves methodological aspects of research, exegesis, interpretation, history, and dialectics.

RESULTANT STRUCTURE

Our journey sets the overall scene of Scriptural revelation and Conciliar documentation. Presented then are discussions of the most polarised views or interpretations of the nature of God's immutability, that of the traditional interpretation of the Classical view, of a static mono-polar God and the Process view of a dipolar God of becoming. Addressed then in detail is the ensuing immutability debate. Out of this debate emerges that which forms our final focus for discussion and note, a reinterpretation of the Classical viewpoint.

MAJOR CONCLUSION

William Norris Clarke's neo-Thomistic consideration of the nature of God's immutability rests on the basis of the notion of the Dynamic Being of God and forms the final focus and basis for our seeking a reconciliation of tradition, scripture and personal religious experience with respect to the nature of God's immutability. Discussion of

Norris Clarke's work is supplemented by a consideration of the work of Robert A. Connor, and in support, that of David Schindler. Norris Clarke's classical reinterpretation gives credence both to scriptural revelation and personal experience of God's historical relationality and responsiveness to humankind without betraying the Classical Tradition. With independent support by Connor and in dialogue with Schindler, it becomes the favoured viewpoint.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES for THOMAS AQUINAS

Following Dodds, M. J. *Unchanging God of Love*, Editions Universitaires, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1986, pxii-xiii, in reference to the works of Aquinas, numbers following the title of the work refer to the traditional subdivisions of that work. In multiple references to a single work, the major subdivisions of the work are not repeated in each reference but remain the same as in the previous reference until otherwise indicated.

The following abbreviations are used for Aquinas references, including in the first instance. The full title list follows the abbreviations list.

Aquinas references	Abbreviations:
Comp.	Compendium theologiae
De aeter.mundi	De aeternitate mundi
De pot.	De potentia
De ver.	De veritate
Epis. ad bernardum.	Epistola ad Bernardum abbatem Casinensem.
In de caelo.	Commentarium in libros Aristotelis De Caelo et Mundo.
In de div. nom.	In librum beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus expositio.
In jer.	In Jeremiam prophetam expositio.
In meta.	In metaphysicam Aristotelis commentaria.
In phys.	In octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis expositio.
In psalmos.	In psalmos Davidis expositio.
I TOO	Opera Omnia ut sunt in Indice Thomistico. Stuttgart, 1975.
Principium biblicum.	Principium de commendatione et partitione Sacrae Scripturae.
Quodl.	Quaestiones quodlibetales.
SCG.	Summa contra gentiles.
ST	Summa theologiae.
Sent.	Scriptum super libros Sententiarum.
Super ad hebr.	Super epistolam ad Hebraeos lectura.
Super ad rom.	Super epistolam ad Romanos lectura.
Super I ad tim.	Super primam epistolam ad Timotheum lectura.
Super de causis.	Super librum De Causis expositio.
Super de trin.	Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate.
Super decretalem.	Expositio super primam et secundam decretalem.
Super ev. joh.	Super evangelium S. Ioannis lectura.
Super ev. matt.	Super evangelium S. Matthaei lectura.
Super iob.	Expositio super Iob ad litteram.
Super is.	Expositio super Isaiam ad litteram.

Aquinas references Full titles

- Compendium theologiae*. Leonine edition. vol XLII 1979.
- De aeternitate mundi*. Leonine edition. vol XLIII 1976.
- De potentia*. Marietti, 1965.
- De veritate*. Leonine edition. vol XXII/1-3 1972-1976. English translation: *Truth*. tr. R. Mulligan, et.al. 3 vols. Regnery, Chicago, 1952-1954.
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- Super epistolam ad Hebraeos lectura* cur. R. Cai, in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*. vol II. Marietti, 1953.
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- Super primam epistolam ad Timotheum lectura* cur. R. Cai, in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*. vol II. Marietti, 1953.
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- Expositio super primam et secundam decretalem*. Leonine edition. vol XLI 1969.
- Super evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*. Marietti, 1952.
- Super evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*. Marietti, 1951.

INTRODUCTION THE IMMUTABILITY OF GOD

A PRELIMINARY SKETCH

Solus Deus est omnino immutabilis

THE ISSUE

In need of reconciliation are two opposing notions of God. On the one hand, Classical Christian Tradition presents us with the notion of an utterly transcendent God, identified as the purposeful intelligence holding all things together, irrevocably bringing all things to a final end, utterly dependable and stable, the God 'of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change'. On the other hand, Christian believers are all too aware, via scriptural revelation and personal religious experience, individual and collective, of the antithetical notion of a God to whom we pray with the expectation of response, a God involved with the history of humankind and our personal lives, a God with whom we wrestle, treat as a friend, lover, arbitrator. To the extent that these two concepts of God lie, for some in dormant and unconscious, for others conscious and troublesome, juxtaposition, while for others, in difficult contradiction, we are prompted to ask the question whether we as human beings can meaningfully turn to God and God to us? This is a question at the core of religion. Can a human person be in a loving relationship with an immutable Divine Being? Can a person be in a trustworthy relationship with a God who changes? This is a modern question but the issue is an ancient one. The tension between God's attributes of justice and mercy hark back to the earliest writings of the Old Testament.¹

METHODOLOGY OF APPROACH

In order to explore how these antithetical notions may be reconciled, an exploratory structure for this thesis has been chosen. The desire to take the reader through this exploration carries the aim of discerning for, and presenting to, the reader an interpretation of the nature of God's immutability which appears best able to afford hope for reconciliation of the traditional viewpoint with biblical revelation and personal religious experience.

Accordingly, the structure of the thesis involves methodological aspects of: research, exegesis, interpretation, history, and dialectics. The understanding of the nature of God's immutability is taken to involve a hermeneutical process, with the two revelatory directionalities, God's irruption from above and human experience from below, both needing accommodation.

Our exploratory structure utilizes a combination of scriptural texts, Church documents, historical theological and philosophical debate, together with human Judaeo Christian experience. All of this provides underlying material for interpreting the nature of God's immutability. It needs to be borne in mind that all data possesses a context which shapes meaning, meanings which in turn come to form patterns, signalled in this thesis by the

Based on John O. Mills, Preface, new Blackfriars, 68, no. 805, May 1987, 210-11.

chapter headings and sub-headings. Further to this, major and minor themes of each chapter expose connections between theological and philosophical persons, movements, and events. These connections are woven throughout the thesis.

The content of the thesis allows for critique and interpretation of theological sources whilst the structure ensures a minimization of personal bias. It will become clear to the reader that a variety of different interpretations and historical judgements draw on the same data, making dialectics necessary. Value stances need to be clarified, along with the exposition of philosophies which underlie various interpretations. Ultimately however a choice needs to be made, by both the writer and the reader.

STRUCTURE

Pursuant to this introductory chapter, the structure of the thesis comprises two main parts.

First part

The first part has two functions and comprises three chapters. It sets the overall scene and presents the most polarised views or interpretations of the nature of God's immutability.

Setting the scene

Introducing the overall scene sets Scriptural revelation on God's immutability and God's relationship with humankind over against Church conciliar documentation on the nature of God's immutability. This is followed by a brief outline of the ensuing debate and an indication is given of that viewpoint favoured by the writer.

Polarised views

The two polarized notions concerning God's immutability are next addressed in some detail.

The Classical Thomistic notion of God's absolute immutability is based on the traditional notion of God's monopolar nature and static being. Our examination of the Classical view concentrates on the foundational work of Thomas Aquinas from the West, supplemented by a consideration of the work of an alternative Classical theologian, that of Gregory Palamas, from the East. The latter's consideration of God's immutability revolves around the notion of divine essence and uncreated divine energies.

The contemporary Process view is made in consequent objection to the Classicist notion of absolute immutability. This is a view of God's immutability based on the idea of God having a di-polar nature, Primordial and Consequent; a view that involves seeing God as non-temporal becoming. Our examination of the objections to Classicist notions treats, in the main, Process thought via the foundational work of Alfred N. Whitehead and his disciple, Charles Hartshorne. Treatment of these objections is supplemented by consideration of feminist views and also trinitarian thought, so far as they air further objections to the traditional notion of God's immutability and contribute to the exploration of the polarized views.

Second Part

The second part of the thesis also has two functions, and comprises two chapters. It addresses in detail the ensuing debate and focuses finally on a reinterpretation of the Classical viewpoint.

Debate

The immutability debate indicates an existent wide range of responses to both Traditional and Process notions of God's immutability. Our address examines views ranging from those expressing unease with the Traditional notion, through those seeking some convergence between Classical and Process views, to those attempting a reinterpretation of the traditional Classical view with particular focus on the work of William Norris Clarke.

Reinterpretation of the Classical view

A reinterpretation of the Classical view is considered by the writer to most credibly offer hope for reconciliation of tradition, scripture, and personal experience.

Our examination of this reinterpretation concentrates on the work of William Norris Clarke, who reinterprets the Classical view in response to Process objections without betraying the Classical Tradition. We offer a detailed examination of Norris Clarke's consideration of the nature of God's immutability, a consideration which rests on the basis of the notion of the Dynamic Being of God. This consideration involves an exploration of God's relationality, and hence relative immutability, within the wider context of absolute immutability. Discussion of Norris Clarke's work is supplemented by a consideration of the valuable work of Robert A. Connor and the supportive work of David Schindler. It is contended here that this reinterpretation gives credence both to scriptural revelation and personal experience of God's historical relationality and responsiveness to humankind without betraying the Classical Tradition with its underpinning of the monopolar nature of God and accompanying consistency, the Eternal God of Being.

Conclusion

Taking a stand in the face of conflicting positions requires a conversion, a commitment. The commitment in this thesis is the choice of Norris Clarke's understanding and notion of God's immutability supplemented by that of Robert Connor. The choice has come to be made from within the Catholic Neo-Thomist Tradition elected by the writer.

LINGUISTIC USAGE

Linguistically, a definitive choice has been made for all reference to God to be without exclusive gender type. Exclusive gender usage is seen by many to be traditional, usually seen as patriarchal, anthropomorphism, rather than reference to the true nature of God. Given the nature of the thesis' ambit, source and commentary degenderisation is integral to the need for consistent inclusivity. Whilst degenderising makes at times for cumbersome reading, this is seen as preferable to the traditional, and for many alienating, use of the exclusive male type for God.

CHAPTER ONE SETTING THE SCENE

SCRIPTURAL REVELATION OF GOD'S RELATION TO HUMANKIND

I will be your God and you will be my people

Implications for God's Immutability

COVENANTAL MODEL

The paradigmatic scriptural model of God's relation with humankind is that of covenant, a term of relationship between a superior and inferior party, the former making or establishing the bond. The God of Israel in the Old Testament is seen by biblical writers as one who is committed to a particular people, who exercises responsibility in mercy and judgement and is bound by that relationship.¹ The Torah is a history of this relationship and in it we find God's relation with humankind best expressed in the Sinai Covenant, the ratification of promise and blessing. Sketching through the foundational Covenantal history reveals something of the nature of God in relation to humankind. Interpretation of this nature, with its implication for God's immutability, has become the subject of debate, as our introduction has indicated. What does this covenantal history indicate to us about God's relation with humankind and thus about God's immutability?

The Consistent Covenantal God of the Old Testament

The Great Flood of Genesis 6:5 - 8:22 provides the initial pivotal relational event in God's Plan of Salvation. The focus is on a people who later, through the Sinai Covenant, come to understand themselves as Israel. God's judgement takes the form of a destructive flood and God's mercy is shown in saving a remnant; the seed of a new historical beginning to God's relation with humankind. Noah represents what it means to be in right relationship with God. "God remembered Noah" and the remnant of humans and animals with him, Gen 8:1. The word 'remembered' signifies for us the nature of God's consistent relation with humankind. Through God's covenant with Noah, in Genesis 9:1-17, the creation blessing is renewed. Preservation of natural order from chaos is covenantally guaranteed. Unlike later covenants, the covenant with Noah is universal and ecological.

In Genesis 12:1-9, God's call to Abram is sketched against the background of a broken, divided humankind. Israel, represented by Abram and Sarah, is chosen with a Promise of land, heirs and an ongoing relationship with God; chosen to play a decisive role in God's historical purpose. The covenant with Abraham and Sarah, Genesis 15:1-21, 17:1-27, their new names signifying a new relationship, is like the covenant with Noah, an everlasting covenant, grounded in the will of God not human behaviour. This covenant is to be fully realized in the Exodus and the Sinai Revelation. Unlike the universal Noachic covenant though, this covenant pertains only to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Through the role of Joseph, Genesis 45: 1-28, God continues to act to preserve life, that of a remnant, the family bearing the Promise given to Abraham. With the historically decisive descent into Egypt prompted by divine revelation, we see that God renews this Promise to Jacob, making from him a great nation.

With the call of Moses, in Exodus 2:23 - 4:17, the God of Israel's ancestors summons Moses in divine commission to lead and deliver Israel. God's word is to be confirmed by a sign, the return of Israel to Sinai for worship, Exodus 3:12. The answer as to the identity of God, "I am who I am" in Exodus 3:14, as an etymology of the cultic name for the God of Israel, YHWH, does not indicate here God's eternal being but rather God's ongoing action and presence in historical affairs², action signified by the stories of the Ten Plagues, Exodus 7:8 - 11:10. We see now that the God of Promise is a God who Acts, culminating in the final act, deliverance of the people from Egypt, remembered in the Festival of the Passover. The presence and guidance of God, traditionally expressed by cloud and fire, is viewed in faith at the crossing of the Reed Sea, Exodus 13:17 -15:1, and during the various crises in the Wilderness, Exodus 15:22 - 16:36. Ratification of the unconditional covenant, in the Theophany at Sinai, Exodus 19:1-25, marks an agreed relationship involving an obligation experienced. The command "If you obey my voice", Exodus 19:5, expresses the laws to be given and kept, as a consequence of the covenant. Up to this point, God's relationship with Abraham and his descendants has been based on Promise. At Sinai the covenant is forged and Israel comes truly into existence. Thus we have it that the relation of God to God's People is sealed, documented in the Ten Words, Exodus 20:1-17, ritually ratified in the Ceremony of Covenant Ratification, Exodus 24: 1-18. The Ark of the Covenant signifies divine nearness, housing the representative tablets of the covenant.

The development of this covenantal relationship clearly indicates to us a consistent God working with humankind to bring about our understanding and living out of this relationship. As part of our understanding of this relationship, the role of the righteous such as Noah, Abraham and Moses, traditionally has been read as central to intercession before God. Thus in passages such as Genesis 18:22-33, God is depicted as responding to Abraham's call to save Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the righteous, and in Exodus 33 God is depicted as responding to Moses' plea to accompany them to the Promised land. Whilst these passages do provide implicit understanding of a God who responds as part of the covenantal form of relation they are not explicitly concerned with God's response as a result of human intercession. Rather these passages reflect the tension between God's mercy and God's justice. This tension is expressed in the need for consistency as understood in the covenantal relationship. Interpreted in this light, Genesis 18-33 becomes a theological inquiry, presented in the form of a dialogue.³ Concern that the just appear to meet the same fate as the wicked marks Israel's zeal for the justice of God. This zeal has its setting in the complex of proverbs dealing with the just and the wicked and belongs to the postexilic period. That doubt can be cast on the justice of God does have a recognizable background, most clearly in the Book of Job. The Book of Job reflects well the antinomy between tradition and historical reality of the plight of Israel. This tension is presented in a way that casts a shadow on the *reliability* of God. Thus, in Genesis 18-33, political circumstances lead Israel to look forward to a demonstration of divine righteousness and bring conviction that the God of the covenant will demonstrate dependability by bringing in the reign of peace and justice.⁴ Consistency will win out. What makes the insertion into the Abraham story possible is that the author of Genesis 18:17-32 regards the demise of Sodom as a good example to explain God's justice in the disposition of history. Abraham, the observer of what is just and right, is the exemplar for recognizing God's just disposition in history.⁵ The consistency, reliability, and dependability of God are seen as indicators of the ongoing covenantal relationship.

It is clear then that the covenant relation denotes, above all else, consistency. "I will be your God and you will be my people". Consistency within the tension between God's mercy and justice is found even at times when the relationship is most under stress. Times such as the Exile, when the prophet Ezekiel stresses the divine sovereignty in breaking down and building up the nation, indicate to us the persistent belief that God is consistent in what is demanded. The paradigmatic God of the Covenant in Scripture is a God of fidelity and justice and is attested to in the Psalms of trust and confidence. We are told in Psalm 136:21 that God's "steadfast love endures forever". Malachi 3:6 states "I am God, I change not". Psalm 25:10 informs us that all the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God's covenant and decrees. Psalm 33:4-5 confirms that all God's work is done in faithfulness, God loves righteousness and justice.⁶ The post-exilic times of Psalm 117 confirm further God's faithfulness as everlasting and Psalm 116 passes on a lesson by the psalmist that Yahweh fulfils the obligation set to those in covenantal relationship. Psalm 136 too, confirms in a post-exilic litany of repeated praise, that God's love is everlasting.⁷ This understanding of God's consistent faithfulness is exemplified in Psalm 89:2-4 as we read: "I want to sing forever of Yahweh's deeds of loyal-love", "use my mouth to make known your faithfulness", "your loyal-love is built to last forever, "you have fixed your faithfulness in the heavens. I have made a covenant-obligation to my chosen one". Indeed, Psalm 89:15 summarises this theme: "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; Loyal love and Faithfulness stand before you." This Psalm expresses a major object of praise in Israelite worship, centring on Yahweh's faithfulness in remembering the covenant obligations. The Psalm clearly presupposes a listening God.⁸ It can be readily recognized that the theological richness of the psalms emerges from profound knowledge of a God rooted in relationship and the framework of that relationship is rooted in the covenant.⁹ The heart of the relationship is consistently driven between mercy and justice. Consistency is thus the chief indicator in the Old Testament, of the form God's relation takes with humankind. What does this imply for our traditional understanding of the immutability of God? Before we attempt to address this question we must first continue our scriptural investigation of God's relation to humankind. If consistency is the message of the Old Testament with respect to God's relatedness, how does this translate in the New Testament?

The Consistent Covenantal Eschatological God of the New Testament

In moving from the witness of the Old Testament to the witness of the New Testament, we find an awareness that God's relation with humankind extends from being that of the God of the Covenant to include being that of the God of Eschatology. Evident throughout the New Testament is the belief that God's Kingdom is going to, and in a sense has already, come. Within this broader New Testament theological understanding of God's relation with humankind, the continuation of the tension between mercy and justice expressed by consistency, continues. Mark 13:20 reflects that, if the Lord had not shortened the days no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom God chose, God shortened the days. The idea of a dependable divinity with whom there is a relationship based on observance of a carefully defined code of conduct, manifests itself in the later Second Temple Period as well as in the New Testament. Early Christianity uses the covenant idea as the basis for its own re-reading of tradition, taking into account the distinctive character of the story of Jesus, whose life consistently bears witness to the new understanding of this relationship. Continuation of the covenantal

revelation in Jesus involving the incarnate God furthers the tension between God's mercy and righteousness, between compassion and sovereignty. Nowhere is this pointed up more poignantly than in the hymn to the Philippians 2:6-11, where the true nature of God is demonstrated by Christ. Because he shared the nature of God, Christ did not hold firm to the high position that was his by right but rather stepped down from it.¹⁰ Subtlety of tension is reflected also in passages such as Romans 8:15f and Galatians 4:6, in which Paul suggests the relationship between believer and indwelling spirit, and God, offers an intimacy of personal trusting, a relationship resembling that between child and parent.¹¹ Acknowledgment in both the Old Testament and the New Testament that God's relation with humankind is marked by consistency, expressed with an eschatological focus in the New Testament, invites us now to consider what obvious implications this holds for the notion of God's immutability. For whilst the nature of the relational God's immutability may be couched in terms of steadfast, consistent, dependable love housed in covenantal relationship, we cannot escape scripturally that this consistent relation must include, indeed makes unavoidable the question of, the receptiveness and responsiveness of God.

The Responsive God of the Old and New Testaments

In both testaments we are told repeatedly that God is affected by the action and suffering of human beings or that God allows God's self to be affected. Both Old and New Testaments make unavoidable the question of the suffering of God. We are told that God is affected, or allows God's self to be affected, by the action and suffering of human beings, through compassion, anger, pity.¹² In the Old Testament this is seen through expressions of compassion, such as in Genesis 6:6, which tells us that the Lord is sorry to have placed humankind on the earth and grieves in God's heart. In Psalm 78:41, we see God's expression of anger in "they tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel". In Isaiah 63:10 we find that "they rebelled" and grieve God's holy spirit; therefore God becomes their enemy; God fights against them. At other times we note that compassion restrains divine anger, revealing the nature of divine love.¹³ In Hosea 11:8-9 we find the following: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." Similarly, in Jeremiah 31:20 we find "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord."

The New Testament continues this Old Testament line of thought. For example, Mark 3:5a tells of the anger of Jesus Christ. "He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart". Mark also tells of the compassion of Jesus in Mark 6:34, "He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd". This theme, of God being affected by humankind and expressed as contingent response, is encapsulated in the statement of principle in the Letter to the Hebrews 4:15a: "We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses". The previously mentioned hymn to the Philippians 2:6-11 presents for us too, an understanding of the pre-existent son, who regarded equality with God not as excusing him from the task of redemptive suffering and death but rather, uniquely qualifying him for that vocation.¹⁴ An understanding of God's contingent

response is best expressed in the parables of Jesus whereby the nature of God is revealed. The short parable of the Friend at Midnight portrayed in Luke 11:5-8, is an example of Luke's capacity to evoke circumstances of real life and social relationships¹⁵ to express the nature of the relationship between God and humankind. The Lukan theme of prayer used here, stresses persistence in human prayer to God for the purpose of emphasising the certainty that the prayer will be heard. In this parable the friend becomes the foil for God.¹⁶ Similarly in Luke 18:1-8, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge is told with the point that it is necessary to pray constantly without giving up. Its moral is made explicit as a logion of the Lord. God's mercy and long-suffering are not in doubt.¹⁷ In this parable the attitude of the widow and the judge are interwoven, the judge, a symbol of God, points up both that God not only hears petitions of those who call but will not delay in response, as did the judge.¹⁸ So too in Matthew 7:7-11 the point is not persistent effort but the good character of God.¹⁹ This passage exhibits exhortations and assertions of God's faithfulness, examples of human faithfulness, and an argument concerning the faithfulness of God to those who call. Once again, this passage focuses on an answering, providing God.²⁰

It would seem clear then that scripturally, we are presented with a God who acts in consistent, contingent, responsive relation to humankind. Such responsiveness on God's part sits uneasily with an absolutely immutable Being. What are we to make of this contradiction?

God of the Covenant - God of Love

As an ethical interpretation of the metaphysical, Scripture presents to us a God of steadfast love, a covenantal God, a God in relation with humankind. How we are to understand the nature of such a God in the light of the Doctrine of Immutability is the subject both of ongoing debate and this thesis. As we have seen, some scriptural concepts of God's immutability are consistent with relative, but not absolute, immutability. To the extent that the Scriptures offer a notion of God as immutable in character in the sense of being consistent, faithful, dependable, the One on whose justice and mercy and covenanted and uncovenanted love we may rely, unlike the fickle gods of nothingness, the concept is not inconsistent with God as responsive, genuinely and literally a God of mercy and compassion. Such an immutable, consistent and dependable character can be relied upon to vary action, response and involvement, through sensitivity. The Incarnation, the God of history and the Divine Involvement can be viewed as the expression of this immutable and dependable character. The scriptural notion would appear though, to be inconsistent with God as absolutely immutable, beyond all change of any sort, not responsive, not literally compassionate but only metaphorically sensitive.

When we read in Hebrews 13:8 that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, the same and forever, the interpretation ought not be that of an acclamation of Jesus Christ's ontological immutability but rather the unchangeable nature of the revelation of the transcendent dignity of Christ. Faith in Christ is faith in the enduring efficacy of his redemptive accomplishment; that is, the truth concerning Jesus Christ never changes.²¹ This truth is the ultimate expression of the God of the Covenant, expressed further in the epilogue of Revelation 22:13 where it is denoted of Jesus that "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end". So too, the correlative

revelation of God's identity in the self-disclosure of God to Moses, in Exodus 3:14: "I am Who I Am" is Revelation's 1:8, "I am the Alpha and the Omega" -- who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty", a proclamation of God's active everlastingness.²²

The Christian Church's Classical Traditional statements regarding this subject sit uneasily beside scriptural assertions indicating the nature of God's immutability. These statements would appear to support a notion of absolute immutability overagainst relative immutability. They thereby present difficulties when viewed in the light of scriptural indicators. What does Tradition say and what is the background to these statements?

IMMUTABILITY IN CHURCH TRADITION

The range of scriptural indicators of God's nature with respect to immutability notwithstanding, official Church statements and documents traditionally and consistently support the notion of immutability but without presenting any explication of what this means.

CONCILIAL DOCUMENTATION

Historical examples of the context and way in which the Church has traditionally presented God's immutability are as follows²³:

Leo I Letter to Flavian of Constantinople 13 June 449 C.E.

"The Tome of Leo", universally accepted as a rule of faith and exercising later influence on the Council of Chalcedon, states that the impassible God has not disdained to be a man subject to suffering. God suffers no change because of God's condescension.²⁴

The Council of Lateran 649 C.E.²⁵

The Council of Lateran with the authority of its canons recognized by Pope Martin 1 as a rule of faith, gives us to read of one God in three consubstantial hypostases equal in glory; and for the three, one and the same Godhead, nature, essence, power, Lordship, kingship, authority, will, action, and sovereignty; uncreated, without beginning, infinite, immutable, creator of all beings and holding them in God's providence--.

The Fourth Lateran General Council Symbol of Lateran 11-30 Nov. 1215 C.E.

The fourth General Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III, provides the profession of the "Catholic Faith" approved by the Pope which includes the statement: there is only one true God, eternal, infinite, and unchangeable, incomprehensible, almighty and ineffable, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; three persons indeed but one essence, substance, or nature, entirely simple.²⁶

The Second General Council of Lyons

"Profession of Faith of Michael Palaeologus" 7 May - 17 July, 1274 C.E.

The second General Council of Lyons, convened by Pope Gregory X, read at its fourth session, "the profession of faith of Michael Palaeologus", the Byzantine emperor. It transcribes a profession of faith proposed to him by Pope Clement IV in 1267 containing a profession of faith submitted by Pope Leo IX to Peter, Patriarch of Antioch in 1053 which in turn had leaned on the *Statuta Ecclesiae Antiquae*, a canonical and liturgical compilation made in Southern Gaul towards the end of the fifth century. In the first part of the profession we read that: this Holy Trinity is not three Gods but only one God, almighty, eternal, invisible and immutable.²⁷

*The General Council of Florence 1439 1442*²⁸

At the 17th General Council, held at Florence, The Decree of the Jacobites, 1442, contains an elaborate formulation of the faith. In it we find that:-the holy Roman Church, founded on the word of our Lord and Saviour, firmly believes, professes and preaches the one true almighty, unchangeable and eternal God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one in essence, trine in persons.

*Pius IX Syllabus of Condemned Errors 1864*²⁹

Pius IX, composing a Syllabus of 80 propositions containing what seemed to be the most dangerous errors of the time lists one such error as being that God is identical with the nature of things, and therefore subject to change.

*The First Vatican General Council Third Session*³⁰

Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* on the Catholic Faith 1870

The XXth General Council uses the following text in the Constitution *Dei Filius*: Chapter 1: God Creator of All Things:-there is one God, true and living, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in God's intellect and will and in all perfection. As God is one unique and spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable, we must proclaim God distinct from the world in existence and essence, blissful in God's self and from God's self, ineffably exalted above all things that exist.

It is important to note, that despite this range of conciliar teaching, the immutability of God has not been defined dogmatically by the Catholic Church.³¹ With this in mind, it is acknowledged by the Roman Catholic International Theological Commission that contemporary problems and classical solutions can clarify and enrich each other in productive dialogue.³² Clearly the notion of immutability is a difficult one. We need to inquire into the background of this conciliar teaching if we are both to understand its suppositional base and find a way forward for its reconciliation with contrawise scriptural indicators and personal religious experience.

PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION OF IMMUTABILITY

Philosophical influence contributing to the process by which the above theological axiom has become established and maintained - 'to be God is to be absolute and perfect, admitting neither of increase nor diminution in being in contrast to humankind's becoming', has its derivation in part in the mindset of the Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, with some of the arguments going back to Plato. These arguments were then taken up into the Judeo schema by the Jew Philo. They became reinforced by certain mystical experience, and philosophically elaborated by those such as Plotinus and other neo-Platonists. The Fathers were compelled to differentiate the God of history as understood in the Bible, from mythological conceptions of gods who undergo becoming, who suffer and change, and from their mythologically interpreted incarnations. In effecting this differentiation the Fathers appealed to motifs of Greek philosophy and its axiom of God's impassibility. In so doing they were to defend God's impassibility in ways more consistent with Greek philosophy than with biblical testimony.³³ However the Fathers did not simply take over the apathia-axiom, for they often attribute to God such emotions as anger, love, and pity.³⁴ They often let the paradox stand. According to Ignatius of Antioch, "the timeless and invisible one became visible for our sake; the incomprehensible and impassible one became capable of suffering for our sake".³⁵ Irenaeus, Melito and Tertullian, use similar language.³⁶ The problem is that the Fathers regarded suffering, pathos, as a non-free external passive experience.³⁷ Given such free suppositions, such sufferings *pathe*, could be ascribed to God only insofar as God freely accepted them³⁸. Origen³⁹ however did move beyond the idea of free acceptance to that of love. If the Second Person had not from eternity felt compassion for our wretchedness, God would not have become human and would not have allowed God's self as the Second Person to be crucified: first God suffered, then God came down. The culmination of Greek philosophical influence came ultimately however to rest with the early questions of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God in Aquinas.

Specifically, this sense of absolute immutability is traceable in the Judaeo-Christian tradition⁴⁰ to Philo, 20 B.C.E. - 54 C.E., with his double insistence, using Aristotelian categories for certain Old Testament scriptural passages, on divine absoluteness and immutability, and God's omniscient providence. Like Philo, Augustine, 354-430 C.E., combines the scriptural vision of God with Greek philosophy. With acceptance of the wholly immutable needing reconciliation with the scriptural Creator, Augustine attributes the change in God from non-Creator to Creator, to that of a change in the understanding of the created. Likewise Anselm, 1033-1109 C.E., also accepting of complete immutability, reconciles his passionless God of divine perfection with Scriptures' God of compassion, by placing the compassion into the experience of humankind. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides, 1135-1204 C.E., follows the concepts of Aristotle's unmoved mover and Philo's absolute existence. He argues systematically for belief in the immutable perfection and utter simplicity of God. Together these philosophers pave the way for Thomas Aquinas, 1225-1274 C.E., traditionally viewed as the Aristotelian Christian and the Christian Aristotelian. Question 9, article 1 of the first part of his *Summa Theologiae* gives Aquinas' reasons for God's unchangeableness. God is sheerly actual, simple, limitless, perfect.

Out of this background and framework then, has emerged the conciliar statements we have outlined. It is clear that the Christian use of the term immutability, when applied to God, has its roots deep within the Greek and Classical philosophical tradition. Within

this tradition a philosophy of being has developed in which, in different ways, the immutability of the One is contrasted with the mutability of the many. By using the terms ‘potency’ and ‘act’ to denote change, and ‘substance’ and ‘accidents’ to denote respectively, the immutable and mutable principles of ‘being’ which changes, a notion of the immutable God has developed and come to be expressed in terms of pure act, of absolute, subsistent being without accidents. The problem is that this immutable being is described in the New Testament in terms of love, not in terms of an immutable substance. It would appear then, that Christianity must modify the traditional philosophy of being, which was constructed within a primarily cosmological world view without any developed personalist categories. Patristic and Conciliar categories of nature and person do not do justice to the full scriptural revelation. In spite of real progress there has emerged an essentialism in Christian thought which obscures the dynamic inherent in the description of God as pure act and so presents an overly rigid notion of divine immutability.⁴¹ The debate which has ensued from this seeks to grapple with, and in many instances posit positions of escape from, this overly rigid position. This debate is of interest to us both in its own right and as a basis from which to discern the position which best offers hope of reconciling traditional thought with scriptural revelation and personal experience.

DEBATE ON GOD'S IMMUTABILITY

Intention of the thesis

It is true to say that the concept of immutability has been established and maintained with some embarrassment and difficulty. The present day theological enquiry into the issue of God’s immutability is a radical attempt to reassess the validity of the classical position. It is the intention of this thesis to consider varying concepts and interpretations of immutability and in so doing move towards a considered, reconciling and acceptable position within and to the Catholic tradition, to which the writer belongs. At present different concepts of immutability are at work in the tradition, not all of them consistent.

Inconsistency in thought on Immutability

Contributing factors

Four underlying tendencies are operational in contributing to this inconsistency with respect to the notion of God’s immutability. First is the notion of history. Central to modern understanding in the human sciences and assimilated by Christianity both in interpreting scriptural and other theological texts and grasping the relationship between God and God’s people, the notion of history has led us from a consideration of the God of history to that of the history of God. Second, it can be said that within the now held evolutionary framework of the world, the notion of change has come to assume a positive connotation, not formerly held in the cyclical world view of Greek philosophy within which the axiom of divine immutability became established. Mutability can now be seen more easily as a perfection and thus its application to God becomes less objectionable. Third, the anti-metaphysical or at least de-hellenization movement within Christianity this century has brought about insistence on a return to the more basic biblical origins of Christianity. The immutability axiom is especially vulnerable to this