THE MANY FACES OF GOD

Highways and byways on the route towards an orthodox image of God in the history of Christianity from the first to the seventeenth century

JAAP DURAND
Dedicated to my lifelong friend, Jaap Furstenberg, 
without whose encouragement this book would 
not have been published.
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GOD HAS MANY FACES

During the winter semester of 1932-3 and the summer semester of 1933 Karl Barth gave a course in which he examined first the background and then the history of Protestant theology from the time of Schleiermacher. The lectures were published in German and the first complete translation in English appeared in 1952 entitled *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Despite the fact that the main part of his book deals with 19th-century theologians starting with Schleiermacher, Barth gives us an extensive analysis of the Protestant theological scene of the 18th century as the background to his primary story. For good reason: the 18th century represents one of the most significant turning points in the history of Western theology.

The appearance of the Enlightenment of the 18th century and its concomitant new and modern theology was not as dramatic as the Reformation of the 16th century, yet its consequences were just as far-reaching and perhaps more enduring, well into what today is called a post-modern world.

There is no part of theology in the broadest sense of the word that did not experience the lure of the Enlightenment, but to a very large extent it was theology in its most narrow sense as the *logos* about God, theology’s presumptuous playing around with ideas and images of God, that was affected the most.

The true heirs of the Enlightenment, modern philosophers and theologians who work and think within a modern and post-modern paradigm, have brought about profound changes in the discourse about God. So much so that the changes which had taken place in the time of the Reformation pale in comparison. With good reason one can argue that the biggest caesura in the history of the doctrine of God appeared in the time of the Enlightenment.

Without downplaying the effects that the Reformation thinking on grace, salvation and faith would potentially have had on the idea of God, we are forced to admit that a fresh, new approach to the doctrine of God lasted for only a short spell during the time of the Reformation. Very soon Reformation theology reiterated the same concepts and ideas of God that had existed for centuries before the Reformation.

In the above sense we can call *orthodox* the idea of God that existed in the Protestant as well as Roman Catholic Churches up to the 18th century.
This orthodox view of God within Christendom has shown great tenacity despite all the efforts by modernist theologians to ridicule it, or even non-modernists to modernize it in such a way that it reflects more of the paradigms within which Christians today believe and worship.

Unfortunately many theologians today consider the orthodox idea of God something of the past - that is, at most a curiosity, something to take notice of but only in so far as a substantial renewal of the original is intended. However, any effort today to write about the contemporary theological scene within Christendom and with special reference to the doctrine of God will be totally inadequate and one-sided if the orthodox view in this regard is not fully taken into consideration. The orthodox view of God to which many Christians adhere is not some passé belief, but part of a doctrinal heritage and system that developed over centuries with many false starts, corrections, variants, emphases, ambivalences and even contradictions.

Arguably the orthodox Christian doctrine of God reached its pinnacle when, within Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, it was forced to give an account of itself against the subtle but virulent attacks of modernist thinkers, more often than not in their own midst. But behind them there was a long history to which they were able to refer.

The purpose of this book is to give an overview of this history without pretending to do the impossible, giving an exhaustive account of all the developments that took place over a period of seventeen centuries. This history takes us back to Greece and the Hellenistic world in the period before the advent of Christendom in the first century. The reason for going so far back in history is simple. Understanding the full development of the Greek-Hellenistic concept of God is essential, because the first meeting between the Christian faith and Greek philosophy and religion played a vital role in the initial phases of the evolution of the Christian idea of God. This history ends with the 17th-century appearance of pietist Puritanism in which the reformed Protestant idea of God reached a certain logical conclusion. By then Lutheran orthodoxy had already taken up a fixed position. For the Roman Catholic Church the culmination of any form of doctrinal debate on the doctrine of God had reached its culmination in the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, only to be confirmed by the Council of Trent during the period of the counter-Reformation.

This is not a straightforward history. It has its hills and valleys, its ups and downs. Trying to trace the route followed by Christian thinkers finally to reach a broad consensus on what an orthodox view of God should be, we are met with some startling surprises, even some unpleasant ones. We would have expected an uncomplicated and straight route along which the orthodox viewpoint at all times distinguished itself in its orthodoxy. This is not the case. We discover a