Of the many ways that the Gospel has been a stumbling block, if not foolishness to many in the ancient, modern, and post-modern worlds, Christian claims about transcendence must rank near the top of the list. The utterly beyond God, Creator of space, time, and “being itself” is also utterly with us—making covenants and commandments, intervening in battles and pregnancies, sundering peoples and forming a People commissioned to go unto all the world and talk and act in certain ways. The unconceivable and unspeakable “unknown god” of Areopagite altars and Plato’s Timaeus is known by Christians to be both beyond even those non-conceptions and also conceived as a child—fully God and fully man, gestating for the usual forty weeks, but unusually in a virgin’s womb.

Whether expressed in terms of classical or modern philosophy or in non-technical “common sense” conceptual grammars created by philosophy, Christians seem to have an intractable dilemma when considering claims of divine transcendence. Interpretations with long pedigrees focus almost entirely on the emphasis within the early Church of God’s absolute transcendence to the extent that God is not just removed entirely from His creation but defined over against it. Recent critiques, that is to say, critiques since Heidegger, have focused on the “domestication of transcendence” which makes God a being who shares in the same kind of being or existence that creatures have, even though God’s being has immense quantitative and qualitative differences with ours. This error of “ontotheology,” and the legion of philosophical and theological motifs which are said to lead inexorably to ontotheology, has been the great nemesis for much of 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century philosophy and theology.
However, when we examine the actual depictions and claims of theologians, we may discover, along with Denys Turner, Tom Hibbs and others, that Heidegger’s characterizations and their modernist and post-modernist populizers are often battling straw men. The logic of transcendence, immanence, and metaphysics of the Christian tradition is something Other than the bogeymen of ontotheology, hyper-cataphaticism, and triumphalism of the received and accepted account for so much of the discourse of the past century.\(^1\) Nevertheless, even sincere attempts at thinking and articulating what it means to say the Christian God “is transcendent and immanent” fall prey to numerous wolfish errors.

Many scholars read the apophatic negations of “being” and “things” as if the mystical tradition was intended to map out a progressive supersession from cataphatic to silent non-knowing. Journey on Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium*, this reading suggests, and you’ll see that really sophisticated Christian thinking and prayer sound remarkably like an inward turned, individual righteousness that “knows only that it knows nothing”…even about notions of “God,” if you will. Others read a dialectic which, while allowing for statements about God or the Good or a moral ordering, elevates an immediate undermining of such statements to the place of honor. One must move through the simplistic assertions of Scripture or creeds or theology in order to reach the higher enlightenment and safety from error that only doubt, uncertainty, and “undecidability” about God can bring.

Among confessing Christian thinkers who agree that we must, nevertheless, speak about and practice faith in relatively orthodox ways, many seem to place primary emphasis on the trembling and troubling of language and act. Reciting the Creeds cannot be “about” anything beyond the actual practice or act of reciting of the Creed—and to “abstract propositional

knowledge,” as the accusation goes, from such performances is to deny or to disguise the inability of language and thought to deal with the transcendent. At most, practices and language may help us acknowledge indirectly what (dare we say “Who”?) is utterly beyond.

In this paper, I want to examine how the path marked out by Paul Fiddes offers Christian thinkers constructive resources for reimagining faithful accounts of transcendence. I argue that the promise of his account arises precisely because he brings to bear his Trinitarian thought on God’s transcendence “in Himself” and with relation to creation. Because Fiddes sees perichoresis, or interpenetrating relationality, as the ontological reality character of the Trinity, he aims to show that that character must be reflected in all that God does—including creating but also in ongoing fellowship with that creation, and especially human creatures.

Fiddes has to some extent lived out (and published) an example of the harmony that Baptist/evangelical scholars have traditionally valued: a real, substantial, rigorous, and curious intellectual engagement with the broad world of academic study while contributing to the congregations whose worship performs the faith sustaining theological discourse. There is an ironic character to Fiddes’ approach, which, while not unfamiliar—Christian theology has always embraced and generated interesting ironies an co-incidences of opposites—may perform a particularly Baptist irony.

Where the problem of transcendence and immanence is stark enough when thinking solely of God, Fiddes points toward a harmonization by increasing rather than diminishing the elements that seem to be in tension. Rather than play within the framework established by Kant and other modern or post-modern binaries of phenomenal-noumenal, material-spirit, certainty-doubt, or presence-absence, Fiddes follows a logic that embraces the co-incidences of seeming opposites. The “solution” to understanding these foolish claims about a transcendent and
intimately immanent God lies in even further foolishness: the participation of creatures with—and even in—their Trinitarian Creator, even with and in the “inner life” of this Creator. Key to this account is a dedication to go beyond oppositions and, crucially, beyond dialectic.

Obviously, there are several theological and philosophical angles from which to approach these issues and Fiddes’ contributions to them. I will briefly introduce a few analyses and positions offered by Fiddes and then seek to clarify further what they demonstrate about transcendence, Trinity, and participation. Finally, I will offer a sympathetic and constructive critique for how Christian scholars and pastors might better adopt and practice aspects of Fiddes’s thought.

I. Covenant, Wisdom, Relation

While Fiddes’s work touches on many diverse topics, disciplines, and genres from Whitehead to Shakespeare to Moltmann to Derrida, I will touch briefly upon only three important focal points. In his accounts of covenant, wisdom, and interpenetration (or perichoresis), Fiddes challenges us to think differently and more consistently about what we mean when we think and speak of God’s transcendence.

Covenant as Communion

When he explores how the theology and practice of covenant can help us think about our relationship to God and fellow Christians, living and dead, as the Communion of the Saints, Fiddes stresses the relational character of covenant in the Jewish and Christian sense. Rather than a synonym for contract or a merely formal regulative relationship, covenant names the ordering of relationship such that past, present, and future as well as individual and community all hold
Reflecting a concern which drives much of his thought, Fiddes makes clear that this kind of covenant entails a kind of communication in which “the person lives from openness beyond itself to others.”

Covenant, rightly understood, has been and should be thought of “in two dimensions at once, vertical and horizontal”; that is, covenant with God and with other members of the congregation. We are not speaking of a dialectic, Platonic or Hegelian, but of a relationship that is mutually generating, identifying, and developing: both dimensions are dynamically present and active at once. These covenants are indeed “ties that bind,” but they do not “fix” each other and are not themselves “fixed” into a rigid or static onto-theological structure. This relationship, then, is a remarkable “both-and” affirmation of God’s transcendence (the vertical covenant) and God’s immanence with humans as a model for congregational relationality (the horizontal covenant).

Wisdom

Given some recent interpretations of the wisdom tradition as a thinly disguised proxy for contemporary scholarly and metaphysically skeptical accounts of ancient Hebrew “cultic” religion, it is a particularly delicious irony that Fiddes presents wisdom as the genre in which we find a strong affirmation of the immanent and relational claims of ancient Israel and the Christian Church about an absolutely transcendent God.

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3 Ibid., 152
4 Ibid., 130. Fiddes is reporting early Baptist thought and practice here, but his suggested theology of covenant is consistent with this characterization.
In this context, the participatory implications of Fiddes’ account of wisdom perform a bold revival of the Apostle Paul’s claims at the Areopagus: this unknown god whom you attempt to honor in non-specific terms, I now proclaim to you with scandalous specificity and confidence. Indeed, a fresh Christian interpretation of wisdom helps us to “make strange again” the outrageousness of the earliest Christian claims (often informed by Philo) about this newest revelation concerning Wisdom, Logos, and gnosis. Even before the Christian revelation, we may see the personification or even deification of Wisdom, and with the same “beyond/with us” dynamic. Wisdom may not be in “a place” and there may not be a single path “to Wisdom,” but Fiddes reminds us that ancient Greek and Hebrew accounts speak relationally about Wisdom: “there are paths of wisdom” which we may walk, and the Torah is in some way “making wisdom present on earth.”

As I will explore in more detail below, one important aspect of Fiddes’s account of wisdom is his willingness to recognize incompatibilities with certain postmodern accounts of transcendence and wisdom. Fiddes recognizes that, even before we get to the challenge posed by the Incarnation, the wisdom tradition of Israel must part ways with much of modern and postmodern thought. While theologians may feel some attunement with and even respect for recent apophatic thought that undermines most knowledge and language about God, “for all this, wisdom—both human and divine—is, unlike [Derrida’s] khora, accessible; hiddenness and silence is accompanied by real presence” as witnessed in Job 38.

Rather than attempting to “domesticate” or to “psychologize” away any of the elements in this dynamic interplay, Fiddes expresses the consequences of the various Christian claims that

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5 “The quest for a place that is ‘not-a-place’: the hiddenness of God and the presence of God,” in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, Davies, Oliver and Denys Turner, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 35–60. 49-50.

6 Ibid., 42.
bear upon this counterpoint of “beyond” and “with us”; “The doctrine of the Trinity fills out what it means to ‘participate’ in the divine wisdom which the wise of Ancient Israel found to be the ‘place’ (which was not-a-place) in which hidden wisdom could be found.”7 Echoing Clement of Alexandria’s description of what a “true gnostic” would understand, Fiddes’s account rightly gives voice to the strange harmony performed by even the earliest Christian amplifications of both transcendence and immanence. Dabar was and is Logos which has always been Sophia which becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Perichoresis/Interpenetration

When Fiddes turns to his nuanced recovery of perichoresis, he addresses even more directly the tensions inherent in claims about transcendence and brings to a head his attempt to push the discussion beyond dialectic. As it is within the Trinity of Persons, so it is between God and creation. In the dance metaphor for the inner life of the Trinity, we see that the “thing” in question, or what we might call the basic “unit,” is the dance or dancing relationship. It is not “two things orbiting each other,” but, in contrast to panentheism, it is ontologically more than one. In the divine reality, Fiddes argues, there are “some boundaries to the symmetry of relations, though not to their reciprocity.”8 We see that this unbound reciprocity reflects a fellowship of equality among the Persons of the Trinity and that this account of interpenetration can help avoid or counter modes of “absorption,” oppression, and domination.9

Along with these power-corrupted modes of understanding and speaking, Fiddes identifies various hierarchical relationships as “monarchianisms.”10 In response to such tendency

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7 Ibid., 55.
9 Ibid., 77, and sub-sections beginning on 81, 89, and 96.
10 Ibid., 67.
toward domination, Fiddes urges suspicion of our desire for security which may hijack even our religious language into setting up idols that promise security. To combat this, Fiddes insists that “We need to become aware of the way that we are actually engaging in the triune life of God, sharing in the currents of the personal relationships of God.” Thus, language of Trinity is, or should be, language of participation.\(^{11}\) Here we see the transition between the standard, limited use of perichoresis to describe the inner triune life and Fiddes’s interpretation that interpenetration describes the relationship between Creator and creature—a participation that Fiddes insists must flow “both ways.”

Fiddes’s most challenging claim, one that I will take up below, is that the Trinity of divine persons is a Trinity of relations, not subjects or agents—the *movements* of the dance, not three dancers.\(^{12}\) With this image of “a God in movement,” rather than stillness, Fiddes argues that a perichoresis of relations is “a challenge to the image of a dominating God whose power lies in immobility and in being secure from being affected by the changing world.”\(^{13}\) In such a conception of God, where even the triune relations are affected by human lives, we recognize that Fiddes has reversed the normal process for “thinking God.” Where most theologians reach Trinity and its implications for relationality only after a fundamental orientation in God’s Oneness and unity, Fiddes begins with the inner life of the Trinity itself—God’s nature as “the space” or movement of relationship between Persons, rather than the Persons themselves as agents—and only then thinking “outward” to give account of the Oneness of that triune relating.

Through all three of these focal points we may see that Fiddes’s position is quite nuanced and perhaps unique on the continuum of contemporary thought about transcendence, Trinity, and

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 70-71.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 81.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 74.
participation. While arguing for the highest levels of openness within God’s own “being,” for human participation even within the Trinity, and for the recognition of profound ethical consequences of both, Fiddes does not sign on with those who insist that critical thought must remain perpetually in the perpetual flux and flow of the play itself within the dialectic. Prompted both by faithfulness to the tradition and a rigorous engagement with contemporary contexts of worship and academic theology, Fiddes insists that we must “abandon talk of a dialectic of ‘absence’ and ‘presence’” in order to explore the nature of a “hidden presence.”

Since he works out important articulations of his account, as well as implications for theology and practice, in engagements with several postmodern thinkers, we will turn to one such engagement to explore Fiddes’s thought from that angle.

II. Fiddes For and Against Postmoderns

In The Promised End and “The quest for a place that is ‘not-a-place,’” Fiddes engages Jacques Derrida in a charitable critique which, at least on one key point, may be excessively charitable. While accurately noting that Derrida offers several insightful readings of and opens up intriguing elaborations upon theological matters, Fiddes insists that Derrida and other architects of deconstruction “are not denying presence altogether, whether of the self or the world (or indeed, of God).” He notes Terry Eagleton’s summary that the postmoderns/deconstructionists “find ‘a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together’,” and that Derrida himself argues that “Nothing is . . . anywhere either simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.” Of course, this

14 “The quest for a place that is ‘not-a-place’,” 42.
15 Ibid., 40.
16 Ibid.
dialectical flickering between presence and absence or traces of a presence that is now absent is precisely what Fiddes challenges with his account of “hidden presence” that should supplant such dialectics.

Derrida sees any attempt to maintain presence or be-ing of any kind, however apophatically corrected and mystically conditioned, as a betrayal of negativity—a sneaky attempt to reinsert the triumphalism of knowing anything about a God-being susceptible to cataphatic language. Fiddes counters by pointing out that speaking of hiddenness presupposes and actually indicates “presence and not absence” (43). Evoking both perichoretic interpenetration and a kind of kenotic pouring out of the self, Fiddes argues that whatever space of “indeterminacy” and “undecidability” we may theorize, it is space, or even “a place” in God (43).

Nevertheless, it is useful to compare further such postmodern attempts at transcendence with Fiddes’s own eventual position, even given his critiques. For example, Fiddes is understandably drawn (as am I and many others) to Derrida’s intoxicating dedication to revealing the openness of all discourse and thought—particularly with respect to the assumption that things resolve or end in some fixed and decisive meaning. However, Derrida does not just seek to foreclose endings or to trouble the notion of final resolutions. Following his promising play with the impossibility of foreclosure entails a strike at the beginnings of things, as well. As Fiddes notes, “the inability to make an end also means a loss of confidence in any value and meaning at all”; and this is precisely the result that Derrida seeks to encourage: undecidability as a hedge against, for him, the inevitably totalitarian character of certainty, even in a final “coming” about which all claims are admittedly uncertain. He misses the “note of hope” in the
end described in Revelation, for example, because he has rejected the original sounding of that note in the beginning described in Genesis.¹⁷

Derrida (and frequent interpreter and interlocutor John Caputo) attempt to achieve an account of transcendence in which even Kant’s merely regulative and speculative God and noumenal source of duty “say too much” while they simultaneously appeal to a hope for justice or responsibility emerging from greater attention to their version of transcendence. This is the hope underlying the creed of tout autre est tout autre—that the surrender of all claims to certainty, determinative authority, or control over even the knowing of any and every other will yield a humbled ethic of responsibility purified of the influence of triumphalist metaphysics grounded in certainty about God. However, there can be no harmony among that which is entirely and undecidably other. So the nature of the longed-for postmodern relationality seems hopelessly cacophonous. In the case of justice, a guiding hermeneutic for many, the postmodern thinkers surveyed here cannot account for why a just polis, community, or State—the good ordering of social or political relationships—can possibly result from the rejection of all decidability concerning order and all knowledge of absolute alterity beyond the fact of its role as the “basic unit” for human awareness of self and others. This is to declare hope for harmony while insisting that all talk of theory is idolatry and that all one may know about different notes is that one is not another.

In some ways, this provides the mirror image to MacIntyre’s framing allegory in After Virtue (modeled upon Walter Miller’s A Canticle For Leibowitz) about the incoherence of contemporary moral discourse which uses fragments of the “content” of well-developed traditions of morality while severing them from practiced forms and philosophical and

theological context. The postmodern thinkers attempt to separate the form of the Christian tradition about transcendence from the content without recognizing that they are condemning their thought to be, to use MacIntyre’s diagnosis, “parasitic upon” the content they either reject as untrue or relegate to the realm of the impossible-to-know-if-true.

By rejecting all “decidability” about God, speaking or negating “anything about anything,” as idolatrous (by Christian and Jewish standards) and threateningly triumphalistic (by some late 20th century and 21st century political and cultural standards), Derrida and other postmoderns exclude their accounts of both transcendence and ethics from true relationality. When we think through the more absolutist postmodern demand for a pure negativity and absence—so pure that we may not speak of hiddenness and therefore destroy mystery itself—we find that relationality itself is actually undone. Without at least the certainty that there is order, even at the minimal claim that the universe was created by God who is Himself ordered and ordering, there is no relationality other than the thin recognition of simple alterity. The evacuation of all “thisness” beyond indeterminate human subjectivity aware of absolute alterity makes incoherent even the thought of relation much less of harmonious relationality—and therefore of responsibility to any Other.

Accordingly, by demanding that all we may say for certain is that the world of other people and “God,” if you will, consists of “entirely not me” and “me,” the account of relationality that emerges is a kind of neo-Cartesian variation on Kant: God remains speculative and un-speakable, and, in place of a transcendent source for a call to duty, ethics can claim only an undecidable notion of response to others about whom we may know only that they are entirely

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other to ourselves. Insisting on a humbled subjectivity rooted in the recognition that we only arrive at ourselves via relationality merely offers a thin substitute for the contingency of created-ness. In place of the *imago Dei* we have an amendment to the *cogito* consisting of an irrelevant parenthetical preface and, in Turner’s judgment, an “ethically offensive” conclusion: “(there you are, and you are not me), I think, therefore I am . . . and since you are entirely other, this “I” is unchanged, and certainly not determined by you, about whom I remain completely uncertain.”

This line of thought has many profound consequences, but the one most relevant here is that such thought operates within and seeks to perpetuate an account of existence which is fundamentally, inherently non-ordered. We cannot even say disordered, because that presupposes some order away from which existence has fallen. Non-order makes impossible resolution, and by erasing beginning, end, and ends (*telos*) alienates the notion of hope and all relationality.

Fiddes attempts to bypass the inevitably alienating neo-Cartesian and Kantian consequences of Derrida’s thought by re-inscribing the hiddenness and silence of God into a relationality that is beyond dialectic but susceptible to our knowing. While on some level this might seem a likely response from a Baptist scholar and minister to an account like Derrida’s which remains staunchly agnostic (at most), I should make clear how Fiddes distinguishes his constructive theology from others who might seem to be saying something much more similar to Fiddes than does Derrida. For example, In *Participating in God*, Fiddes challenges the conversation about God’s foreknowledge of all eventualities by arguing that God does know “all the possibilities that exist for the world and its inhabitants . . . But God knows these as possibilities, not as actualities, because they have not yet happened.”19 Later, in his chapter

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19 *Participating in God*, 142.
“Communion and Covenant,” Fiddes makes a similar point, and explains that God “cannot know the details of future, because these events have not yet come into being through God’s own creativity and the cocreative response of the world.” I would challenge this account as an unnecessary “domestication” of God by making divine knowledge subject to the limitations of time, God’s own creature. Nevertheless, Fiddes’s position—that this is not a domestication, because it is a quality of “God’s own choice in creation”—addresses a God who knows and who is, before and distinct from creation.

This is different in critical ways from some other accounts which emphasize a human role in God’s knowledge and power. Richard Kearney, who, in positing his “God Who May Be,” makes an effort to “rethink God as posse” rather than as a self-sufficient God of power, being, and causality. Pitting this new god over against the “metaphysical’ thinkers who presuppose an ontological priority of actuality over possibility,” Kearney hopes to draw from “more ‘poetical’ minds” in order to arrive at “a new category of possibility” that is not susceptible to the “traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible.” By turning to mystical, poetic thinkers such as Angelus Silesius for a precedent of “the possible as a ludic and liberal outpouring of divine play,” Kearney reframes creation as “an endless giving of possibility which calls us toward the Kingdom.”

One of the central images or conceptual keys for understanding God as posse in The God Who May Be is transfiguration—both in the sense of the transfigured Christ and Kearney’s project of “Transfiguring God.” Kearney reads the narrative of the Transfiguration as a lesson in

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20 “Communion and Covenant,” 140.
22 Ibid., 44.
how possibility trumps any attempt to “fix” God even in terms of presence. Where the disciples respond to the event on Mount Tabor by suggesting that they build booths or tabernacles, Kearney sees an “effort to fix Christ as a fetish of presence, imposing their own designs on him.”23 The disciples’ had missed the point that, by renewing human nature in himself, the transfiguration “is as much about us as it is about God.”24

While he does not follow Kearney’s implication that an always-becoming God must be God-as-possibility, and must replace talk and concepts of God-as-presence, Fiddes does seek an account of divine presence which is responsive to and even constituted by possibility rather than actuality. For Fiddes, this is a way of honoring the relational character of God’s very be-ing—such that everything God creates bears the form of relationality and is sustained in perpetual relating. Thus “God, in humility, allows the relations within the triune life to be shaped by the human lives they represent,” and even more dramatically, “God relates to God’s self through human relations.”25

III. Dynamically Relational Transcendence: The Harmony of Creation

Discussing King Lear in The Promised End, Fiddes notes the interplay among “bonds” that both tie and move, “fix” and dynamically generate. Cordelia’s bond to her father is “the bond of love, the harmony that ties together the elements of the universe in Elizabethan thought,” and this love bond is the same as that which creates ex nihilo and “moves the sun and the other stars.”26 It is to this constellation of ideas and images—bonds of harmony and love, participatory movement of distinct Persons in and creatively outward from God—that I now turn, motivated

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23 Ibid., 42.
24 Ibid., 46.
25 “Communion and Covenant,” 137.
26 The Promised End, 56.
by the ways that Fiddes’s arguments have initiated a “resonant sympathy” with musical readings of Trinity, transcendence, and participation.

Fiddes has developed important positions over against theories and systems of “absolute presence.” Along with many postmodern thinkers, he finds that a God of absolute presence is a fixed or static God, unrelated to and unaffected by a creation which He stands far above in absolute domination. Derrida and others, of course, find that asserting presence of any kind brings all of those frightening consequences as well as totalitarian political oppression. While I am certainly opposed to such a notion of God, I do not find that a more “fixed” God, a Trinity of Persons who are not solely relations and movement, is in fact this God of “absolute presence.” In fact, my argument is that to preserve the relationality and dynamism that both Fiddes and I value—a value I hold in part thanks to Fiddes himself—we must recognize and provide a clear account of order in God. It is essential and constitutive for a robust Trinitarian account of God, relationality, and participation for us to have more “fixing” of God, but in a sense that is emphatically not static or dominating.

My critique on these matters centers on the need for order in any robust thought or talk of relationality and participation within and without a transcendent God. My apologetic for order does not emerge from a desire or need to “protect” the propositional statement about God being “a God of order,” much less from a predisposition to defend a Platonic or neo-Platonic metaphysics. Rather, I come to it from quite another direction: the absolutely essential role that order plays in giving us a robust and dynamic account of relationality itself as well as the ethics and moral formation that should perform that relationality. So my challenge to Fiddes with respect to ordered relationality is actually prompted by his vision and is a kind of sympathetic
response or sounding to it. As will become clear, this recovery and re-articulation of order links fundamentally with the musical account of theology which drives the rest of this essay.

The realization driving this sympathetic response emerges from the recognition that every embodied form of participation beyond passive observation or “mere existence”—which is certainly not the sort of participation that Fiddes or I have in mind with respect to God or creatures—has certain necessary and ordered conditions. The taking of Communion is a participation accomplished by orderly giving and receiving as well as narratively ordered act of memory. Responsive readings and recitation of the creeds follow the order of texts, and hymns create an immediate multilayered and ordered community of music and lyric. When we move to consider something like ethics, especially the performance of character in virtues ethics, we have to ask what we must know or love or which habits we must have cultivated to be able to participate.

Here I have in mind echoes of Fiddes’s observation about the wise seeking “to align themselves” with the “Spirit of Wisdom.” Of course, in order to align, or tune, or harmonize, one must have a reference “point” or pitch as a standard or goal. He explores and applies the concept of “attunement” extensively in Seeing the World and Knowing God, and I agree that the shift to music offers promising and far reaching potential. While the language of aligning certainly fits in the context of walking the path of wisdom, it cannot, without further stretching of the metaphor, account for relationality as well as music. And yet, attunement has its limitations, despite its convincing invocation by Fiddes, von Balthasar and others within several different contexts.

In harmony, however, we may see an alignment more fitting for what Fiddes seeks to express about the relational, participatory nature and life of God and creation. Where even “tuning” suggests the alignment into a single tonal identity, harmony maintains the sense of
being brought into proper relationship even while respecting—indeed, requiring—the maintenance of distinction. Fiddes has thought about and responded to a version of this claim about harmony, but we should distinguish between that version and what I suggest here. At precisely the point in *Seeing the World and Knowing God* where Fiddes explores the musical possibilities for understanding our attunement with Wisdom as participatory in the life of God, he warns that “A stress on the unity and order of music, in tune with a single cosmic system of numbers, can result in an over-confidence that all discord will be harmonized. . . When this dialectic [between being and non-being] is applied to the tension between concordance and discordance, however, there is the danger of overlooking the sheer intractability of human suffering, as all pain is seen as sublimated in its harmonization with the passion of Christ on the cross.”

The account of harmony Fiddes rejects here reflects a longstanding and common misunderstanding and misapplication of what harmony is and is not, and he is right to find it incompatible with a faithful account of God. While I would argue that it is true, eschatologically, that “all discord will be harmonized,” this is because harmonizing something does not, cannot, overlook or sublimate anything that is part of the harmony. What Fiddes rejects is a common misuse of the term “harmony” for what is really more of a Hegelian synthesis or anti-harmonious reduction into a clamorous unison. Furthermore, where suffering is heard as “discord,” we must recognize that discordance and concordance have no meaning outside of a harmonic structure or ordering that instructs and forms our “ears.” Harmony requires the basic “discord” of non-identicalness—of notes that are not the same and clearly distinct from each other—but rightly ordered and related, the “discord” is harmony itself.

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Traditions of harmony provide the contexts within which we may recognize what is fittingly ordered. The use of a flat-3, flat-5, and flat-9 over a dominant chord would sound absurdly wrong to Mozart, but it practically defines the theory and practice of harmony for Theolonious Monk (and other jazz musicians extending the traditions of blues music). The idea of knowing and speaking about the One creator God who is also three is cacophonous foolishness to the Greeks. But within the harmonic structure of Israel’s God revealing the Gospel through the incarnate Son, it is the simultaneous revelation of the true meaning of harmony and its place as the “ontological default” of all existence. It must be made clear that order does not mean “system” in the sense of a totalizing absorption or flattening of everything into the dominating logic of a systematic process. This is the logic of the Logos, through whom, for whom, and by whom all things were made and hold together in an order that quite poignantly longs for, restlessly, the “rest” of interpenetrating relationship.

When we turn this diagnostic of harmony to look at the three focal points described above, we see that such an ordering is already operative in precisely the ways that Fiddes seeks to draw out. Covenant is a relationship that bears the dynamics of musical harmony. Scripture and tradition embeds the concept of covenant into contexts which, like the descriptions and practices of the ordered relationships among musical notes, rely on actual laws and rules in order that relationship may exist and develop. Yet, even with actual laws and rules—some even literally and actually written in stone—covenant is not “fixed” in the sense of a rigid and non-dynamic system.

Wisdom, especially in the sense of attunement to the “paths” or Sophia-logical personification, orders our understanding and relationship to God, even at the level of proverbial behavior. And, like robust accounts of the virtues such as we see in Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium*
and Tree of Life, aligning or attuning ourselves with virtue is simultaneously to participate in the most human life and the inner life of God. So again, we see that the ordering is essential to relationality and is therefore essential for dynamic participation. Wisdom is the “fixed” proverbial guidance against marrying into relationship with “other gods,” and it is also the mystical journey toward the relationship of being crucified with Christ and passing into the brilliant darkness of a knowing beyond knowledge. It is a dynamic harmony made possible by order.

Finally, rather than humans shaping the relations which make up the Trinitarian perichoretic inner life, I believe that our ability to “affect God” is more akin to what Begbie calls “mutually resonant” relationship. In this reading, human performances of divinely guided love do not shape an already perfect intra-Trinitarian performance of love. But they do “set each other off” like sympathetic overtones—and perhaps even mutually enhance and enlarge each other as the human “Amen” response in some sense does “complete” the divine call without actually effecting change in that call. Our response to God may be a rest after restless longing, but it is not a stasis: the IV-I “Amen cadence” is always both resolution and prelude. For once we have participated in, aligned with, attuned to, and been guided into the relational order that roots and grounds us (like a harmonic structure) in love, God ushers us into an even broader, longer, higher, and deeper music of the fullness of God.

Out Chorus (Coda)

Taking my cue from Fiddes, I will conclude with my own amplification of tension between seemingly opposed dialectical options. Our shared goal of emphasizing a dynamic, open God defined within and without by relationality requires something like the following: a
recovery and rehabilitation of hierarchy that invites participation on the model of jazz improvisation. Participation in the theological sense of the tradition demands a level of both rootedness (in tradition, grammar, narrative, concept, practice, etc.) and dynamism which we can see best in jazz improvisation. The “holy ordering” of hierarchy, properly understood as the kind of ordering fitting to God and the creation brought into being through God’s exemplary Logos and hokmah, is an infinitely dynamic and “fixed” structure that makes relationality and participation possible. Participation in such a world would have to be an improvisation—rightly understood as a coherent and spontaneous response to a fluid relational context (rather than the noise of improvisation misunderstood as “just playing anything you want”). Just as ordering into right relationship makes harmony possible, recognizing a hierarchy of “dynamic transcendence” given by God makes our improvisational participation possible.

When Fiddes urges going beyond a dialectic of present/absent or transcendent/immanent, he notes that we can only make sense of these enigmas “in terms of our involvement in the network of relationships in which God happens.”28 The practice of music can greatly enrich our thinking about what this involvement looks like. When people are making music together, thereby inscribing their human relating within the dynamics of musical identity and relation, we can see an alternative way of being that transcends the limits of other modes of human relating—all the while remaining rooted in embodied materiality. In jazz improvisation, we see—hear!—better than any other human practice the dynamism of relationship performed within order, distinct individuality made possible by dynamic community, and participation in a tradition via creative response to ever-changing contexts.

28 “The quest for a place that is ‘not-a-place’,” 52-53.
Recognizing that Fiddes and his postmodern interlocutors may hear the threatening march of a too-confident triumphalism in this highly condensed paean to hierarchy and improvisation, I will close by noting the central role of humility in this account. Practically speaking, that is, as a matter of practice, learning to improvise fluently is an almost perpetually humbling experience. While there is “content” and “technique” to be learned and practiced, whether scales and turnarounds or Scripture and spiritual disciplines, the musical order and holy order that make jazz improvisation and participation in the triune life possible is almost infinitely dynamic and filled with all the bad tuning, selfishness, risk, and joy inherent in networks of relationships with other people and our sinful selves.

Whatever wisdom we may receive about the “hidden presence” never ceases to invoke wonder and humility rather than any sense of complacent, confident mastery. One of the specific causes for wonder is Wisdom’s expression of the same strange harmony of unity and multiplicity we find in the Trinity and Christ’s two natures. Even Bonaventure’s “true metaphysicians” find “wondrous” the beauty of Wisdom, “for at times it is uniform and at others manifold; at times it assumes every form, and at others none . . . uniform in the rules of divine Law, as manifold in the mysteries of divine Scripture, as assuming every form in the traces of the divine works, and as without any form in the elevations of divine raptures.” 29 Indeed, even our ability to wonder, a goal far from triumphalist certainty, is completely contingent upon God rather than our own intellect or even affective powers. Part of the reconciliation effected in the Incarnation is that Christ, the Center, re-establishes the proper relational order of all creation: “He it is who restored the hierarchy of heaven, and that below heaven which had totally fallen.” 30

29 Bonaventure, Hexaemeron, II.8.
30 Ibid., III.12.
tuning, but even more so, we hear bursts of the harmony of which we are already a part, but which we are called to more faithfully perform.

I read Paul Fiddes as offering his work with that sense of wonder, humility, and faithful relationship, not just because it is his charitable way, but because those qualities are fitting for doing theology about a God who models, in a distinctly divine way, wonder, humility, and faithful relationship. My response to Fiddes here is intended as a harmonious re-sounding of similar concerns and goals. Mine are not the same notes, but they offer a sympathetic and, hopefully, complementary “solo” on the same changes (harmonic structure) toward a music richer in understanding, expression, and practice of the faith that affirms and negates, orders for freedom, and praises in song and silence.