1

Credo

BEING CHURCHED

We enter the Cathedral. It's the mother church of the diocese. The air is cool, the shadows deep and in the silence distant sounds reverberate. *I believe in God.* Who is God or *this* God? What does this appellation signify? What is this God? How did we learn to use words in this way and a name like this? How did we invent the literary genres that disseminated these words, this naming? The word 'God' softly implodes, becoming meaningless in its density, its fragrance. Its meaning opens and closes, vibrates like a vast diaphanous forcefield that enfolds this place with its elevations, tall, curved arches, and attenuated sight-lines. It draws us into its circulations making of this space a heterotopia: a different kind of space.

Heterotopia? Well, this is not the world, enclosed or otherwise, presented to me as I walk around Oxford's shops or its indoor market. I walk differently here. I tread more softly; my pace is slower; and my posture bends or cranes according to what I am seeing and trying to understand. Although I have been here a thousand times I can't domesticate the place; I cannot appropriate it even though it has become familiar. It is a holy space; a space within which I am taught about that name, that God, that who or what or operation circulating among so many of my other more mundane beliefs. Names mean other things in here. I can learn the names but how did I learn that these names named something for me? Were meaningful for me? *Made* sense? And what it is that makes this space holy? How do we learn this holiness? How are we made holy? It's not just the religious symbolism—crosses, an octagonal font, and the vast eagle across whose back is stretched a heavy Bible. It's not just that prayer has been said here for over a millennium. There is some inherent quality to this place, difficult to define, that makes it holy, that generates and requires holy practices that make us holy—liturgies that are set aside from the routines of daily life, performances undertaken in, and expressions of, a belief in *the father almighty, maker of heaven and*

earth, services in which there is praise and worship offered, prayer said and blessings given, ministrations received, sacred Scriptures read, the gospel preached, and a healing emanates. This is a place invested with care and value and attentiveness where people have wept and petitioned and fumbled for words and delighted. But what does 'father' mean to someone like me who has not known his father since the age of fourteen, who is himself a father (for better, for worse), who has known many other fathers (for better, for worse) and who has known many other sons and daughters down the years? What does 'father' mean to those who are mothers and sisters and aunts? Those who practise their belief in this *father almighty* themselves become holy, a chosen people, a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2.9). And these practices have been continuing daily here since the earliest Anglo-Saxon foundations were laid for a convent, possibly with royal associations. The present building was constructed as an Augustinian priory in the 'royal' style of Romanesque, from the twelfth century. The space created—the lofty vaulted ceiling, the light falling from clerestory windows on the sandstone pillars, the rich colours in the stained glass and vestments, the scents of ancient incense and waxed candles, the different surfaces of brass and silver, wood, and the different textures of linen and wool, wine and water, the sounds of an organ voluntary or a canticle sung by the choir—invites and offers a reorientation and pedagogy of the senses. An orientation to what? To what is most present and most allusive: the base note of a resonant silence that insists we listen. But what are we listening for in this circumscribed location where time distorts around a saint's remains that have been interred? I have been summoned to attend.

The sight-lines of this heterotopian space and this pedagogy converge on the high altar on which a crucifix stands. *I believe in Jesus Christ.* Who is this Christ? The very plan of the church is cruciform. In a rose window above the altar, facing out into the rising son, is the figure of Jesus Christ as Pantokrator; He through whom and in whom all things were created. And this includes the materials fashioned by human beings from which this place has been constructed and decorated. His is the body broken by the priest; His is the blood filling the chalices; ours is the making of bread and wine. His is the name invoked throughout the liturgical practices; the anchor point for all the ecclesial activity. He is present as God, the almighty one, the Incarnated, the Son of God, God with us and for us; God in our time and histories and attested to in the writing of the Scriptures. *Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. On the third day he rose again.* He is the incarnation, the embodiment of the Father Almighty, the *Son of God.* The church in all its holy, peopled devotions and in all its tactile stone and wooden seating, in all its sound and sights, in all its

tastes and smells is His body. He is present in and through the operations of salvation opened by Him and proceeding from Him in and through and as the Spirit.

I believe in the Holy Spirit. What is the Spirit? How did I learn the language of the Spirit speaking; recognize the Spirit's voice—in me, in the world? The one through whom salvation is effected, the one who sanctifies. The one who is also God, though not as Father and not as Son. So as what then? The Spirit fills the breathing, thinking, and acting of the body of Christ, His living body: yesterday in the nuns gathering around the relics of the saint, the canons in the choir stalls, the Protestant reformers, and the Victorian Anglo-Catholics; today in the priests and deacons, the vergers, choir, and sidespeople, those who come to worship, those who come as pilgrims, those who believe, *the holy Catholic church, the communion of the saints.* Those forgiven. Those baptized. Those looking for *the resurrection of the body,* who participating now in the diurnal and universal operations of the living Jesus Christ, anticipate the perfection and consummation of a resurrection life in Him. *The life of the world to come.*

The *credo* is lived; it is not just recited. It has always been lived. In its origins lies the beginnings of theological reflection in a systematic form; that is, the logical structure of the Christian faith in which one dogmatic article relates organically to another. It is only because God is the Father Almighty that there can be a sending and the miraculous (in Volume II I will say 'scandalous') incarnation of the Son. It is only because of the coming of the Son of God that there can be salvation for the whole of creation through the Spirit. It is only because of the Spirit's proceeding that there is a church. An articulation of one Christian dogma will impact on the articulation of all the others: to accept that human beings are capable of saving themselves (and I leave aside for the moment what is it that is understood by 'salvation') is to understand Jesus Christ as an *exemplum.* It is to deny participation in Christ and to deny the Son of God's participation in human nature. The Church becomes an assembly of self-helpers, like a group of weight-watchers, each encouraging another. There are many ways of believing in Christ, but there are some ways of believing that are better. That is: more transformative. That is: opening us up to being transformed in His name.

THE CREEDS

Although there was in the Gospels a Christian story, a story narrated according to the chronological order of God's providential dispensation in several