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BOOK REVIEWS

Remythologizing, Projection, and Belief:
A Reply to Vanhoozer

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Introduction

Kevin Vanhoozer believes theology is in need of *remythologizing*. In his recent tome, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*,[1] he criticizes Rudolf Bultmann for his demythologizing project which is, he thinks, just one among other "myths", that is (borrowing from Aristotle), the presentation of a drama, a dramatic rendering of the biblical material. Bultmann objects to traditional ways of conceiving the biblical drama as in need of such demythologizing without being cognizant of the fact that his own position is itself a piece of mythologizing in the Aristotelian sense. In other words, his own theological proposal is a story about how we should read the Bible, yet another interpretive framework, rather than the sober truth of the matter, which overturns all previous attempts to make sense of the text (RT, pp. 16-17).

Against Bultmann, Vanhoozer offers a different, *dramatic* account of the biblical material, which does not *de*mythologize, but *re*mythologizes it. Scripture presents us not with a series of cobbled narratives that must have the acids of criticism applied to them in order to get at some Ur-story underlying the accretions of legend and miracle. Rather, Scripture presents us with a divine drama: God speaks and seeks to draw us his creatures into the story as he relates to us. The result, as Vanhoozer puts it, is "a Trinitarian dialogical theism" which "view's God's being as a being-in-communicative-act" with the "God/world relation" being regarded "primarily in terms of a distinctive communicative causality" and "Scripture as ingredient in an economy of triune discourse, and biblical interpretation in the church as a form of participation in God's communicative acts." (RT, p. 32)

For those familiar with Vanhoozer's earlier work, much of this talk of divine communication in terms of theodrama will be familiar. This is clearly a further development of, or a stage in, his constructive project, which purports to be setting out what he has elsewhere termed a *first theology*. This is a theology that integrates biblical interpretation, systematic reflection and philosophical engagement. It is certainly stirring stuff. Not only is his laying out of different live options in the debate in the early chapters enlivening (I shall

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[1] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Hereinafter, cited in the body of the text as RT, followed by page reference.

be using the second chapter on the classical doctrine of God in my Systematic Theology classes), his own alternative is intriguing and suggestive, even if one does not agree with everything he ends up saying. Vanhoozer's work is arguably the most sophisticated postmodern evangelical theology on offer today.[2] It therefore behooves us to take a careful look at what he has to say.

However, rather than simply recapitulating some of the main steps in his reasoning, I want to offer a line of criticism that draws on a theme looming in the background of much of the book as it develops. Aside from his early dismissal of Bultmann, there is another important interlocutor with whom Vanhoozer wrestles. This is Ludwig Feuerbach. I will suggest that unlike Bultmann, Feuerbach presents a much more serious demythologizing challenge to Vanhoozer's project, and one which, I worry, he has not adequately answered. I address this concern in two parts. The first focuses on what I shall call Feuerbach's Problem of Projection. I shall sketch out an argument against Feuerbach that, I think, Vanhoozer could avail himself of to strengthen his case in RT against this particular objection. But there is a second, related worry that can only be ameliorated at some cost to Vanhoozer, either in amending important epistemic commitments he has, or in providing his readers with a further argument in favor of his own remythologizing story.

The Problem of Projection

Let us begin by developing the objection. Call it, the *Problem of Projection*. It is a problem familiar in some measure to most theology undergraduates or seminarians. As Vanhoozer points out, where Bultmann is a "soft" demythologizer, who reduces theological claims to existential hopes (RT, p. 18), Feuerbach is a "hard" demythologizer. He insists that theology is really "anthropology all the way down" (RT, p. 18). Thus Vanhoozer: "[a]t the center of Feuerbach's own system of projection, then, stands the 'secret' that theology is really only anthropology, that the essence of all religion, including Christianity, is the belief in the divinity of human nature." (RT, p. 19) Belief in God, on this view, is simply the reification of certain notions we have about ourselves, the projection onto the clouds of a father-like entity that is no more real than any other figment of human imagination. Put more formally, the Problem of Projection (PP) can be expressed like this:

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[2] In his response to this paper, Professor Vanhoozer remarks that this is a backhanded compliment. I meant no offence in describing his work this way. I think Professor Vanhoozer's work is appropriately described as a postmodern theology just as, say, Radical Orthodoxy is often said to represent a postmodern theology. For his work eschews what he describes as the "hegemony of modernity" and rejects foundationalism, opting for a "postfoundationalism" instead. For discussion of these matters, see Vanhoozer's Preface to Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and D. Stephen Long's chapter on Radical Orthodoxy in the same volume, pp. 126-45.

(PP) Christian theological language about God is disguised language about the needs of human beings: such language reifies cherished human religious thought, values, beliefs.

Vanhoozer's response to this is to claim that the Problem of Projection is really nothing more than the postulation of an idol, rather than the identification of the living God with the projection of human imagination (RT, p. 20). Contemporary Trinitarian theology is not immune from this mistake. We can construct all manner of sophisticated accounts of the divine nature that are no more than projections, even if they are Trinitarian in nature (RT, pp. 22-23). What we need in order to block the various contemporary iterations of the Problem of Projection (including the apparently theologically orthodox ones) is to begin, like Barth, with the premise that first theology depends upon God's self-presentation in revelation: Scripture is the vehicle by means of which God speaks. Without this, all theology is, as Vanhoozer puts it, "smoke and mirrors", the "human projection of religious affections and special effects" (RT, p. 23).

Let us be clear: Vanhoozer is not denying that projection of a sort takes place in theology. What he is denying is that such projection is the reification of *merely human* thoughts and values. In place of this he posits the projection of the divine voice onto the stage of world history via the speech acts contained in Scripture (RT, p. 24). The Bible is, in a way, the script by means of which God enters the human drama. It is the way in which God ensures his voice is heard. But this is only ensured via the agency of human authors.

At this juncture the first part of my worry arises. For as he explicates it in RT,[3] Vanhoozer's attempt to block the Problem of Projection does not appear to have the resources in order to show that his own 'story' about divine self-communication is *more* than another sort of mythologizing project, one theological myth amongst others, so to speak. In order to see this, we will need to take a whistle-stop tour of some of the epistemology Vanhoozer has developed in his earlier work, which has a bearing upon what he has to say in RT. Thus, for example, in *The Drama of Doctrine* he tells us he is engaged in a

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[3] I say this advisedly: Vanhoozer has written a lot about theological method and has touched on these matters before. See, for example, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and The Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 204-206; pp. 288-90; pp. 298-99, and *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005)*,* pp. 301-305. It might have helped his reader if he had pointed to some of this earlier work more explicitly. There is also an important question here about development of ideas. Whereas there is a strong debt to elements of early Reformed Epistemology in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* This is much less apparent in his later work and (interestingly) the references to more recent work in the field drop off (e.g. no references I can find to Plantinga's, *Warranted Christian Belief* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000]) as his own theodramatic account of Scripture takes centre-stage. I shall return to this point presently.

postfoundationalist approach to theology, which he dubs the canon-linguistic approach. Central to the project is an epistemic humility. "Knowledge on this view is neither immediate nor indubitable; it is rather mediate via interpretive frameworks. No set of data is ever foundational because the data is always framework filtered and theory-laden." Nevertheless, "thanks to aspectival realism, we may say that some filters allow true knowledge to get through."[4]

Vanhoozer offers his readers an alternative to the metaphors often used to explain the two dominant epistemological theories about the superstructure of beliefs, namely coherentism and foundationalism.[5]

According to coherentism our beliefs are part of a web. Each particular belief (that the world is round, say, or that the Earth revolves around the sun) is interconnected to the other beliefs we hold in a network. Each belief is inherently revisable in light of new evidence that may undermine, defeat, or strengthen the warrant a given belief enjoys in the larger web of beliefs. What is more, the centrality or prominence a given belief has relative to other beliefs in a person's noetic structure may change so that the belief in question becomes more peripheral (because less important, relative to other beliefs) or more central (more important relative to other beliefs). Thus, if I come to think that the existence of God is much less likely than I previously thought, my belief in God may shift from a central place in the web to a much less important place, affecting the place of other beliefs relative to it in the process, e.g. my belief in the importance of participating in regular acts of public act of worship.

According to foundationalism, my beliefs are not in a web, but arranged pyramid-like, with the more fundamental beliefs lower down the structure, "holding up" those that are further up the structure, towards the apex. At the base of the pyramid of beliefs are those that are the foundations upon which the whole superstructure is laid. Indeed, according to the foundationalist

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[4] *Drama of Doctrine,* p. 293. Hereinafter, cited as DD, followed by page reference. According to Vanhoozer, aspectival realism is not mere perspectivalism, where potentially multiple incommensurate hermeneutical frameworks provide us with nothing more than another interpretation of the matter. Aspectival realism allows that our fallible epistemic frameworks do generate knowledge (DD, p. 289). They are, we might say, aspects of truth, or approximations to the truth of the matter from a particular epistemic vantage, the vantage that we occupy. This is a refinement in his thinking from an earlier avowal of critical realism in *Is There A Meaning in This Text?*, pp. 299-303. (Hereinafter, cited as IMT, followed by page reference.)

[5] An outstanding survey of contemporary epistemology is given in Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For an accessible treatment of these themes from a religious point of view that is critical of Plantinga's moderate foundationalism, see Paul Helm, *Faith with Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a recent treatment of these issues that endorses the moderate foundationalism of Plantinga against postfoundationalists, see Randal Rauser, *Theology in Search of Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

there are really only two sorts of belief, those that are inferred on the basis of other beliefs I have—like the interlocking blocks of stone that make up the pyramid as a whole—and those that are not inferred on the basis of other beliefs. These are the beliefs at the foundations of the pyramid, the ones that offer epistemological support, as it were, to the beliefs that are inferred from them and from other inferred beliefs. As epistemologists say, foundational beliefs do not derive their warrant or justification from other beliefs a person holds. They are beliefs that are said to be *basic*, non-inferred, epistemologically primitive. Perceptual beliefs are usually good candidates for basic beliefs, whereas, say, the belief that the painting I am looking at is by Picasso is inferred on the basis of other things I know, e.g. his cubist style, the fact that it is signed "Picasso", is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and so on.

In contrast to coherentism's web and foundationalism's pyramid, Vanhoozer proposes the postfoundationalist metaphor of a map.[6] We have an interpretive framework with which to work (our map; the canon-linguistic approach), but there must be some connection between the framework and the reality to which it corresponds (the topography; God) in order for the map to be of any use. As Vanhoozer remarks, "some filters allow true knowledge to get through." This is the aspectual realism component of his project. It is clear that Vanhoozer thinks of this as part-and-parcel of an epistemological fallibilism, that is, a willingness to test and refine one's hermeneutical and epistemological framework, or to correct the topographical features recorded on one's map in order to bring it into closer conformity with the data.

Vanhoozer is very much the theological magpie, picking up different philosophical ideas lying around which seem particularly useful to his own project.[7] So, in addition to these remarks about postfoundationalism, he also helps himself to aspects of Plantinga's Warrant Epistemology, even though Plantinga is a moderate foundationalist.[8] What he likes is Plantinga's notion of a design plan, with its reliabilist account of human knowledge. On this way

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[6] See: DD, pp. 294-95.

[7] Lest the reader misunderstand, this comment is not meant pejoratively. Theologians have always picked up whatever philosophical tools they find lying around, and pressed them into philosophical service. In this manner, Vanhoozer is simply carrying forward an ancient and venerable theological tradition.

[8] However, it should be noted that although Plantinga is a moderate foundationalist his collaborator in Reformed Epistemology, Nicholas Wolterstorff, does not describe himself as a foundationalist. My point here is just that Vanhoozer utilizes aspects of Plantinga's warrant project without (apparently) commitment to his moderate foundationalism. But one could be a non-foundationalist and a Reformed Epistemologist—Wolterstorff being a case in point. It might be that Wolterstorff's work would be more congenial to Vanhoozer in this respect, as it has been to other aspects of his project, e.g. the application of speech-act theory to claims about the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

of thinking, what we believe is innocent until proven guilty. Such beliefs are formed by epistemic mechanisms that function according to a design plan aimed at truth.[9] In his earlier work Vanhoozer even flirts with the Plantinga-inspired notion of properly basic beliefs.[10] These are beliefs that are (a) non-inferential, that is, not held on the basis of other beliefs from which they are inferred, and (b) justified or warranted, that is, formed in an epistemically responsible manner.[11] But this drops out of his later work because, I assume, proper basicality is embedded in a foundationalist epistemology. (We shall return to this matter at the end of this paper.)

What this indicates is that in his earlier work Vanhoozer has thought with some care about the sort of epistemological concerns RT raises. But his reader will need to be familiar with that literature in order to see the whole picture; he makes little reference to this previous material in RT. When we lay these earlier remarks about his epistemology alongside his more recent comments in RT about theological method, a composite picture emerges, which I will attempt to sketch here.

First, Vanhoozer's remythologization of theology is not merely the offering up of one theological myth amongst many. He has some reason for thinking that his story offers a better, more reliable hermeneutical framework than, say, that of Bultmann or Feuerbach. What he can say is this. Although we cannot guarantee that we have the absolute truth of the matter, we can be sure that our hermeneutical framework, that is, the framework of canon-linguistic remythologized theology, provides some purchase on the truth, sufficient for us to be confident that it provides a theological myth or story more complete and more accurate than that of Bultmann or Feuerbach. Granted there is no "view from nowhere"—not even the canonical-linguistic view—from which to survey the epistemological landscape and make judgments about it. Nevertheless, what Vanhoozer provides is both internally coherent and a good fit with the biblical material, wherein (as he puts it) we find the mighty speech acts of God. Because our cognitive and linguistic faculties work according to a design-plan aimed at truth, we can move beyond perspectivalism to aspectivalism. That is, we can have some confidence that our theologically attuned hermeneutical frameworks give us the truth of the matter, or near enough, at least some (most?) of the time. Furthermore, because we are fashioned according to a design plan we can know certain things about God because he has designed us to be receptive to him.

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[9] See, e.g., IMT, pp. 204-207; DD pp. 301-305. As Plantinga memorably puts it, "a belief has warrant if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no malfunctioning) in a cognitive environment congenial for those faculties, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth." *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. viii-ix.

[10] IMT, pp. 288-92.

[11] For discussion, See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 83-84.

With this made a little clearer, the worry with which we began comes into focus. Despite his epistemological groundwork in DD it looks like his appeal to special revelation is what moors his hermeneutical framework to the theological truth of the matter in RT. Much of the work in this most recent volume involves the spinning out of his particular peroration on the claim that Scripture is the vehicle for divine discourse. But with so much riding on this claim, it is strange that he does not do more to shore up its apparent vulnerability. For, absent the notion of properly basic beliefs, it is not clear (to this reader, at least!) how he can ground the assertion that his hermeneutical framework, and his theological myth, is more likely to be closer to the truth of the matter than the frameworks and myths of his interlocutors. He has not provided an adequate means by which we can adjudicate whether his canon-linguistic approach to doctrine, or his more recent remythologizing approach to theology, is closer to the truth than either Bultmann or Feuerbach.

Rebutting the Problem of Projection

We come to the second part of the concern, which is more constructive in nature. Recall that our Problem of Projection was this:

(PP) Christian theological language about God is disguised language about the needs of human beings: such language reifies cherished human religious thought, values, beliefs.

Rather than concede the point to Feuerbach, why not argue that his Problem does not adequately map what we find in Scripture? Is the doctrine of the Trinity, or the Incarnation, or the Atonement what we would expect a process of reifying human religious thought, values and beliefs to yield? That seems extremely unlikely, given the way in which these central and defining doctrines of Christianity have been hotly debated down through the centuries.[12] If Feuerbach was right, we would surely expect to find in Scripture reasons to think the theology it contains is merely reified human thought, values and beliefs that express human needs for the care of some transcendent being. Only if Feuerbach can make good on this claim can his objection go through. But there is reason to think he cannot make good on this claim. For it is not at all clear that all Christian theological language about God is *merely* disguised language about human beings, or that such language *necessarily* reifies cherished human thought, values, beliefs, or is *just* the expression of human needs. As it stands, the Problem of Projection is not strong enough to make good

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[12] I do not deny that one can hotly dispute fictional entities, such as the merits of Captain Ahab or the vanities of Don Quixote. But no traditional, orthodox theologian thinks of Christian doctrine as analogous to discussion about fictional entities. The disputes over doctrines are more like disputes over hotly contested political positions. The contest only makes sense if it is understood to be wrangling about which view gets closest to, or instantiates, the truth of the matter.

on the claim that *all* theological language about God is mere projection-language. In fact, it is nowhere near being able to make good on that claim. But assume that the Feuerbachian is bold enough to make this stronger assertion about theological language concerning God. If we adjust the Problem of Projection accordingly, we come up with what we might call the Revised Problem of Projection (RPP):

> (RPP) *All* Christian theological language about God is *merely* disguised language about the needs of human beings: such language *necessarily* reifies cherished human religious thought, values, beliefs.

But upon reading this it becomes immediately apparent that this revised version of the Problem is just too strong as a statement about the sorts of writings we find in Scripture. In order to motivate this stronger version of the Problem one would have to offer a story about how all sorts of Christian theological language about God in Scripture, including central and defining doctrines like the Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement are *mere* reifications of human thought, values and beliefs, and cannot be anything more than this. But such a story is likely to be extremely unconvincing. For it will have to account for the fact that many thinkers down through the centuries since the writing of the New Testament have found these doctrines to be objectionable *precisely because they do not comport with certain cherished human religious thoughts, values and beliefs*. For these doctrines make the extraordinary and counterintuitive claims that that one entity can be both one and three at one-and-the-same-time; that one person can be both fully human and fully divine; and that one innocent person can through some act of self-sacrifice blot out the guilt of a multitude of others, or at least, bring about the reconciliation of some number of alienated individuals with God. These do not look like instances of theological language that reifies certain cherished human thoughts, values and beliefs. In fact, it looks like these doctrines run against the grain of certain cherished human thoughts, values and beliefs, such as the deep-seated intuition that one entity cannot also be three, or that one person cannot subsist in two distinct natures, or even the intuition that an innocent cannot be punished in place of the guilty.

It might be thought that even if this is right, the Feuerbachian can reply that theological doctrines as counterintuitive as the Trinity, Incarnation or Atonement may still be the drivers of human needs, and that is all that is required for the Problem of Projection to go through. If human needs are expressed by these doctrines, then there appears to be some motivation for the Problem after all. But even here it is not at all clear that the Feuerbachian is right. If these doctrines are merely projections of human needs, are they what we would expect to find as expressions of such need? Perhaps humans long for a divine parent, even a divine savior. Suppose that is true. That in-and-of-itself does no work in providing an explanation of how it is that we arrive at the truly staggering claims of the Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement. A God who is not merely one but three, who becomes human without ceasing to be

divine, who is everlastingly human, and who dies a criminal death does not sound like the stuff of human longing but human nightmare—a world turned upside down. (That, I suggest, is an indication of the truth of the Gospel.)

If this is right, then it turns out that Feuerbach's Problem is an undercutting defeater[13] for orthodox Christian belief in the God who speaks in Scripture that fails to adequately account for features of at least three of the central and defining doctrines of Christian theology—doctrines implied by the very Scriptures by means of which God speaks and acts.

As far as I can see, there is nothing preventing Vanhoozer from helping himself to this line of reasoning against Feuerbach and the Problem of Projection. It would appear to fit with other things he says, and may even provide a means by which to strengthen or fill in lacunae in the presentation of his reasoning in RT. But he still needs to provide his readers with some reason, independent of this remedial argument, for adopting his remythologizing story about God's "projection" of himself in the speech acts of Scriptural drama rather than that offered by the demythologizers like Bultmann or Feuerbach. Without such explanation his account looks like it is merely one of many hermeneutical frameworks being hawked among the different stalls offering competing theological interpretations of Scripture. I have already hinted at one way in which Vanhoozer can provide this additional reason. He could reacquaint himself with Plantinga's warrant epistemology. Then he could claim that we know that Scripture is the place at which God speaks provided our belief that this is the place at which God speaks is warranted. And, as noted previously, for Plantinga a belief is warranted provided it is "produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no malfunctioning) in a cognitive environment congenial for those faculties, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth".[14] It might even be that belief that Scripture is divine revelation, or the place at which God speaks, is a properly basic belief.

This is not to deny, like Barth, that God may also speak to us in other places as he may speak to us "through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming scrub, or a dead dog." He may even speak to us through "a pagan or an atheist".[15] But there is something about the way in which he

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[13] "Defeaters" are objections to an argument that provide reasons to challenge the warrant a particular belief has. Defeaters come in several varieties. Undercutting defeaters are objections that seek to undercut the warrant a particular belief enjoys, e.g. the objection to belief in the existence of the Judeo-Christian God based on the notion that if there was a God, he would make his presence manifest to all human beings. The fact that God is "hidden", at an epistemic distance from most human beings, undercuts belief in the Judeo-Christian God who is said to desire relationship with human beings, and to reveal himself to them for that purpose.

[14] Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, pp. viii-ix.

[15] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/I, Second Edition (trans. G. W. Bromiley; ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), p. 55.

speaks via Scripture that is normative. And we know this via the warranted belief we have that this is the place at which God speaks in a revelatory manner. It might be a challenge to marry such an appeal to warranted belief with postfoundationalism, especially if the belief in question is thought to be properly basic (i.e. the properly basic belief that when I read Scripture, God speaks to me or the belief that Scripture the means by which God reveals himself – assuming these are good candidates for properly basic beliefs).[16] But it is at least possible that some Christians have such beliefs that provide justification for the claim that Scripture is divine discourse, or is the place at which God speaks. And it does not seem terribly outlandish to think at least some of these people hold such beliefs basically, or non-inferentially. If they do hold such beliefs in a basic way, and if these beliefs are warranted or epistemically well formulated, they are properly basic beliefs. For those who do not come to their belief in Scripture in this manner, some other means of grounding his appeal to revelation must be sought. In which case, and aside from considerations about rebutting the Problem of Projection, the reader of RT is faced with a trilemma: cling to the rather frail reed of the Barth-inspired appeal to revelation in order to moor the remythologization of theology to some truth about the divine authorship of Scripture (despite the fact that Vanhoozer provides insufficient grounds for preferring this to any other theological myth); provide some more robust alternative, which builds upon the existing edifice of Vanhoozer's first theology (taking up his penchant for postfoundationalism); or, setting the postfoundationalism of DD to one side, ground the claim that God speaks by augmenting an appeal to Barth with one to Plantinga.[17]

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[16] It might be here that Vanhoozer could look to a more Wolterstorffian account of post-(classical) foundationalism to augment his own project.